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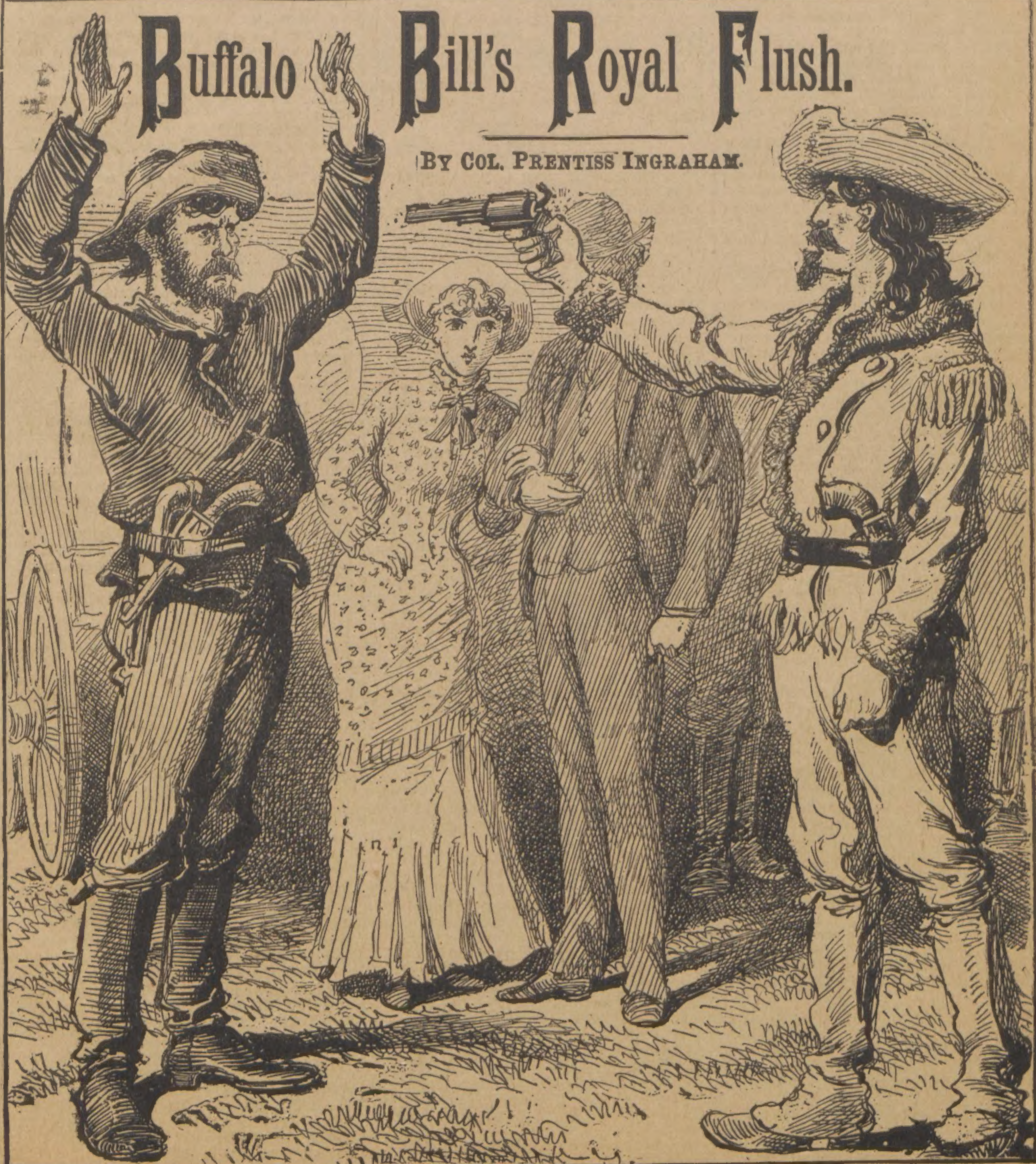
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"MY GOD! YOU ARE BUFFALO BILL!" CRIED THE TREACHEROUS GUIDE, HOLDING UP HIS HANDS.

Buffalo Bill's Royal Flush;

OR,

The Pony Rider's Death-Run.

A Romance of the Mysterious
Unknown of the Overland.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAP SET FOR BUFFALO BILL.

"Shall we rope him or kill him, captain?"

"Kill him, you fool! Do you not know that it is Buffalo Bill you will have to deal with?"

"That's so, sir, and he owes us his life a score of times over."

"Ay, a hundred times, for has he not killed my men—has he not eluded us time and time when he has borne large sums of money as Pony Express rider, and did he not lead the attack upon our stronghold when I lay half dead from that bullet-wound received by accident at my daughter's hands?"

"Now you ask if you shall kill him?"

"Why, of course, kill him! If he had a dozen lives, I would take each one of them again and again, if I could, for Buffalo Bill is one for us to dread above all other men on this Overland Trail."

The speaker was a man of striking appearance, tall, well-formed, with the stamp of a gentleman born, but the look of one whom an evil life had marked most sadly.

He was dressed in buckskin hunting jacket, leggings, top boots and a black sombrero, encircled by a gold cord and with a sable plume in it.

One side was looped up with a gold pin representing a cloven hoof.

He had with him two companions, rough-looking fellows, both of them. All three were heavily armed, though the one who appeared to be the leader carried no rifle.

"We have plenty of time before he is due here, so I will go to the upper end of the basin and see that the men there are going to make no mistake."

The spot where the three men were was a narrow, rocky pass, through which a well-travelled trail ran. The cliffs on either side were lofty, bold and ragged, and boulders at their base afforded a safe and perfect hiding-place for a foe to lie in ambush, just what these three men intended to do to cut down one expected ere long to pass that way.

The pass widened into a little basin, or valley, some fifteen acres in size, dotted with timber here and there, rocks, and a couple of small lakes, and hemmed completely in by walls or cliffs, averaging from sixty to three hundred feet in height.

Just a quarter of a mile from the pass referred to, the valley narrowed to another one, more open and wider than the other—a splendid place for an ambush.

The man addressed as "Captain" walked rapidly along the trail running through the basin, until he came to the upper and wider pass.

From behind the rocks stepped four men to greet him. They were a fair type of the two at the other end of the little valley.

"I came to see that you were watchful, and understand just what you are to do," said the chief.

"I think so, captain," answered one, giving a soldier's salute. "We are to lie low and let Buffalo Bill pass us into the basin, for the next rider will doubtless be Buffalo Bill."

"Yes; he is the pony rider on to-day's run; that is understood."

"He will allow his horse a swallow of water at the little lake near the other pass, so he will not be at full speed when he reaches you."

"Yes; that's likely."

"You are to bring him down, but should you fail, and he turns to retreat by this pass, you are to kill him."

"That is just what will happen. He cannot escape our double trap, for only a bird can get out of this basin, save by the passes, and we will have him secure, like a fish in the net."

"I do not believe we can fail to get him this time; but, then, he has escaped so often when we thought we had him sure, that this time there must be no mistake."

"So, look well to your weapons, and when you hear my bugle call, come to join us, for it will be the signal that he is dead."

"But remember, the man who makes a mistake and allows Buffalo Bill to escape, I will kill with my own hand, for I have correct information that he carries fifty thousand dollars in crisp United States money with him."

"You understand me now, I hope. No mistake, upon your life!"

The men saluted and went back to their hiding-places, while the chief retraced his way to the lower pass.

He sauntered leisurely along the winding trail, passing through the clumps of timber, along the border of one of the little lakes, back to the lower pass, where he had left his two men.

"All is ready there, and if Buffalo Bill is on time he will be here in just fifteen minutes," the captain announced, looking at a handsome gold watch he had drawn from his vest pocket, and then going into hiding with his assassins to await the tragedy.

CHAPTER II.

THE DANGER SIGNAL.

"Silence, men! And to your posts, for he is coming!"

So called out the leader of the men at the upper pass, the barrier which the coming pony rider was to be allowed to enter, that the trap might be closed in around him.

Hardly had the men crouched down in hiding when the rapid clatter of hoofs reached their ears, and soon, afar back on the pony trail were visible a horse and rider.

The horse was running along at full speed, his neck stretched far out ahead, and his hide was wet with sweat that showed he had been going at the same swift pace for many a mile.

A light bridle and a racing saddle, to give no more weight than was necessary, were upon the splendid bay, while across the saddle was thrown a pair of leather pouches, or bags, seemingly well filled with express matter.

The rider sat well up in his saddle, his poise and bearing indicating the perfect horseman, while his eyes were scanning closely the trail ahead as he went flying along.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings and hunting shirt, top boots and a slouch hat, and wore in his belt a pair of revolvers.

From his belt hung straps, catching on to the express bags, so that if he had to leave his horse quickly he would still carry his valuable "freight," as the pony riders called all matter which they carried on their runs.

Through the first ambush, like a flash, passed the horse and rider, and the eyes of the latter began to sweep the sides of the little valley or basin.

Though years ago, the face that then looked out bold, determined and fearless from under his slouch hat, is the same handsome countenance so well known to-day the world over. Then he was "making history" as a Pony Express rider, and to-day he stands recorded in Wild West annals as the "Prince of Pioneers," the "Border King," and "Buffalo Bill, the White Eagle of the Sunset Land."

To-day he is General W. F. Cody, soldier, author and actor; but the laurels he has won were builded upon his earlier life as Pony Express rider, guide, scout and Indian fighter.

Riding swiftly along that perilous Utah trail that day did the "Man of the Future" dream of the name he was making for romance and history? Did his ambition, even then, soar to the pinnacle upon

which he would, one day, write the name of Buffalo Bill?

Who can say? The dreamer of to-day may become the philosopher of the future.

Trained to regard the slightest sign that betokened danger, Buffalo Bill, the Pony Express Rider, saw that his horse gave a slight shy as he sped through the entrance to the valley.

The rider showed no sign that he suspected danger, but he muttered as he sped along:

"Ho, old fellow! Was some one there?"

"Ten to one there is, for that pass is a good one to guard if they want to hold me up at the other one."

"I never liked this valley, and often wondered why the road agents overlooked its advantages for their devilish work."

"Ah! something is wrong, surely, for you are as nervous as an old maid!"

He gathered up the reins of his horse and drew him to a halt at a position half way between the two passes into the valley.

The valley was almost in the shape of a crescent, so he could not be seen from either end, and as the soil was soft there, the sound of his horse's hoofs had not yet reached those that were so anxiously awaiting his coming.

As he glanced about him he heard a voice call:

"Buffalo Bill!"

It seemed like a call to attract his attention only, for it was not loud and clear.

His keen eyes quickly sought the cliffs on either side, and there he beheld the one who had called.

Standing upon a cliff, just peeping out of a clump of pines, he beheld a form enveloped in a blanket.

The arm was beckoning to him to approach, and without an instant of hesitation he rode right across the valley toward the cliff.

Fortunately the rocks and pines scattered in the valley hid him still from the view of those at the passes.

He had at that point a couple of hundred yards to ride; then he halted beneath the cliff, just as he saw a lariat descending from above.

A closer look revealed that two lariats had been attached together, and knots had been tied in them all along to aid in securing a firm grip in climbing the sixty feet to the cliff above.

On the end of the lariat, as it descended, he beheld a slip of paper, and grasping this as it came within reach of his arm, he read:

"Be quick, for you have not a moment to lose!"

"The passes are both guarded by the King of the Cloven Hoofs himself and four of his men."

"Desert your horse, climb the lariat to the cliff, run along the side half a mile to the valley beyond the pass, and you will find there the outlaws' horses."

"They are guarded by one man, but from what I know of Buffalo Bill that is a slight barrier to him."

"Beware, you pony rider, for the Cloven Hoofs are again upon the trail!"

"YOUR UNKNOWN."

CHAPTER III.

FLANKING FOES.

Buffalo Bill read the note quickly, and recognized the writing of one who had in the past proven a good friend of the pony riders—one who had been a mysterious and unknown guide to him around dangers that threatened.

That it was a woman was all he knew, and that she must be an ally of the outlaw band whose deeds had gained for them the name of Cloven Hoofs, there was no doubt.

More he did not know; but he had supposed that she had gone, whither no one knew, when, a couple of months before, her own written words to him had declared that she had killed the King of the Cloven Hoofs, and told him how to find the retreat of the band.

He had then led an attack upon the retreat, followed by the Pony Riders' patrol; and thereafter had supposed the trail was clear; but now all the old dangers were renewed; the chief, whom he had then supposed to be dead, was again in ambush, with his followers, when again comes a warning from the unknown woman!

These thoughts flashed like lightning through the brain of Buffalo Bill, but not for a moment did he hesitate about obeying the warning.

He would first obey, and solve the mystery afterward.

To spring from his horse, draw off the saddle and bridle, and tie them with the pouches to the end of the lariat, was a minute's work.

Then he grasped the knotted line firmly, and, hand over hand, began the ascent to the plateau overhead.

It was a long and hard climb, even for a sailor, but Buffalo Bill had a grip of iron and sinews of steel, and at last he reached the tree on the edge of the precipice, and, grasping a limb, swung himself on the ledge.

Without looking about him he hauled in the lariat and soon had his precious freight, saddle and bridle in his possession.

Then he unfastened the end of the lariat from the tree, coiled it, and, shouldering his traps, gave a glance up and down the valley.

He could not see either of the passes, but knew that those who guarded the upper end must be wondering why they had not heard shots announcing the fate of the pony rider.

He gazed down at his faithful horse and said:

"Farewell, old fellow! It is a pity to leave you, but I must. Some day I may recapture you from those who will now get you."

He did not seem to think of his kind preserver who had given him the danger signal and warning and had secured his safe escape out of that death-trap.

Perhaps past experience taught him that it was useless to look for one who had so persistently eluded him heretofore.

Then along the cliff crest he started at a rapid run, which he knew he could keep up for a long distance.

That his danger was by no means over he was well aware, for had the warning not told him that there was a guard over the horses of the outlaws?

He could have continued on the trail on foot, eluding the Cloven Hoof and the horses he was guarding, but that was not Buffalo Bill's way of shirking duty.

There was a horse to ride; there was a foe to meet, and he would face the work as he had a hundred times done—just as the emergency required.

He ran along the ridge to the end of the spur, followed a deer trail heading down to the valley, and, as good luck would have it, he came out in the valley in a clump of timber, just beyond which he saw several horses staked out and feeding.

They had their saddles on, but their bridles hung on the saddle horn, so that they could feed well.

Where was the guard?

The pony rider crept nearer and nearer through the timber, watching intently for the outlaw sentinel.

Soon he discovered him, and much nearer than he had looked for, as he was sitting with his back against a tree within fifty feet of him.

That he was fast asleep Buffalo Bill saw, and he glided quickly toward him, glad, as he supposed, of a chance to take him alive.

Was it a premonition of danger, a dream flitting through his mind that caused the sleeping man to suddenly utter a startled cry and spring to his feet, revolver in hand, while he glanced wildly about him?

"Pard, you're wanted! Hands up and save trouble!" called out Buffalo Bill, sternly.

But the response was to throw one

hand up to a level and pull trigger as the weapon covered the pony rider.

It was quickly done and well aimed, but the little gun missed fire and there followed an answering shot; if the man would not surrender he must take the consequences.

The fire of Buffalo Bill was quick, the bullet went true, and the outlaw pitched forward, a bullet in his brain, even as his finger pressed the trigger for a second shot, but the bullet flew wild.

Knowing that the shot must bring the outlaws upon him within five minutes, Buffalo Bill sprang forward, lifted the dead outlaw in his arms and ran toward the horses, a few hundred feet distant.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PONY RIDER'S FLIGHT.

Buffalo Bill ran to one of the horses with his ghastly load, threw the body of the outlaw across the saddle, strapped it there quickly with the lariat he carried, and pulling up the stake, ran from horse to horse, gathering them in.

The saddle and bridle he carried were quickly made fast upon one of the animals, behind the saddle already on his back, and selecting the animal which he knew must belong to the chief, he sprang on his back and started the others off ahead of him.

There were five horses in the bunch, and the pony rider said grimly:

"Not such a bad swap, after all, for Redskin; but I'll get him back some day without a trade."

The bunch of horses were headed the way he wanted them on the pony trail, when a loud voice was heard:

"There he goes now! In some way he has flanked us! After him!"

"He has all our horses, chief!" shouted another voice, and that the outlaw leader realized this fact a vindictive oath testified, while several shots were fired in quick succession.

Buffalo Bill was not yet two hundred yards away from the outlaws, and one of the bullets shattered his saddle horn, but did him no harm.

He saw the chief and two men following him, while back, just leaving the pass which he had flanked, came the other outlaws, all running at full speed.

"You have missed him, curse you!"

"Down on your faces, and let those men fire over us!" shouted the chief, and he set the example by throwing himself flat upon the ground.

Then his clear, resonant voice was heard again:

"Fire on that man and kill him!"

The men halted in their running, took deliberate aim, and fired together.

The bullets flew after the flying pony rider, but though neither touched his person, the horse under him was stricken to his death.

Quick as a flash Buffalo Bill recognized the fact, and his danger.

To be dismounted there put him on a level with his pursuers.

He would be one against five, and armed only with revolvers, while four of them carried rifles.

The outlaw whom he had slain had a rifle, but it was strapped on the horse which carried his saddle and bridle.

Deep into the flanks of his stricken horse he drove his spurs, and the frightened animal, with one mighty effort, made a few bounds, and ran alongside of the horse furthest in the rear.

Buffalo Bill grasped the mane of this horse, and clinging to his precious Express pouch, threw himself from the back of the beast he bestrode to the one running alongside.

He was not a second too soon, for, with an almost human look of anguish, the splendid animal, striving hard to keep up the race, plunged forward and went down, never to rise again.

"Poor, brave horse! You saved me with your dying effort," murmured the noble-hearted pony rider, and he glanced back at the fallen steed, so handsomely equipped with the Cloven Hoof chief's

saddle and bridle, which Buffalo Bill was compelled to relinquish, for he saw that the outlaws were still running at top speed, loading their rifles as they ran.

He did not wish to take the chances of another fire, though it would be at a longer range, and urged the horse he now had under him to a greater speed.

The animal had no bridle on, for that yet hung on the horn of the saddle; but little Buffalo Bill cared for that.

Just as he swept into some timber, the outlaws began to fire again, in a scattering way.

But the range was a long one, and the shots were at random, as he was now out of sight of his foes.

The daring rider, however, did not slacken his pace.

He found the animal he had mounted about the slowest of the lot, but remarked in his characteristic way:

"It beats hoofing it all to pieces, with five full grown outlaws crowding on your trail."

After riding a short distance further he slackened down to a steady canter.

Glancing at the elegant gold watch which he carried, his thoughts ran:

"I am just ten minutes late, and with a slow horse to ride, and four others to drive, I will lose more time."

"But, never mind; it's worth being a little late to carry in the spoils I have—a dead outlaw, and five fine horses, not to speak of saving the Express!"

"Well, we are to have lively times on the Pony Express trail once more, it seems, as the Cloven Hoofs are again on the move."

"I thought the king of these scallaws was dead, and that my unknown mascot had departed from these parts forever; but it seems not. Here she is, alive and on guard again—the good angel of the overland. God bless her!" and the exclamation was spoken aloud with heartfelt fervor.

The Good Angel of the Overland! Was she, indeed, to repeat that heroic and wonderful role which had made her Buffalo Bill's preserver and the Pony Rider's mascot?

Our story shall answer.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE PONY RIDER'S TRAIL.

Pony Rider Ranch, the headquarters of Captain Nat Starbuck's Overland division, was located in Utah, and its run was the most dangerous of all the long trail over mountain and plain, and through the canyon.

That stretch of the trail was a very wild and rugged one, haunted by a band of outlaws known as Cloven Hoofs, under a leader who was called the "King of the Cloven Hoofs." Besides, it was now and then raided by Indians and white renegades who herded with the redskins and put them up to every species of mischief and evil, while the Mormons, not friendly to the march of the Gentiles into their midst, withheld no sympathy from outlaw and renegade which would frustrate any invasion of their domain by men from the East.

But the Pony Express Company had risked large sums of money in pushing their trail across the continent, defying all dangers, overcoming all obstacles, and though often meeting with heavy losses, paying them promptly, and still guaranteeing to carry small and valuable Government despatches, packages, letters, and money, across the vast distances from St. Jo to Sacramento.

It was, indeed, a wonderful enterprise—something the world never before heard of or believed possible, but wholly characteristic of the indomitable men and American genius that, at length, were to make that howling wilderness the seat of a proud and glorious civilization.

Pony Rider Ranch was beautifully located in a valley which was guarded by high ranges. Through this valley ran a large stream, fed by the mountain rills and perennial springs of the hills, while

hundreds of acres of timberland and meadows aided to render the post one of great utility.

The Pony trail wormed into this valley through a pass coming from the eastward, and out of it, westward, through a narrow canyon, either of which could be quickly guarded against almost any hostile invasion.

There were a few miners and a mining settlement or camp well up in the range, and a settlement of farmers up the fertile valley, taking advantage of the protection the pony riders' station afforded.

Of the riders and station men there were over three score, so that, altogether, a hundred men could be gathered quickly for defense when any peril threatened. An extra force of pony riders was held at the post for general and special service, for each day's run necessitated changes which only a considerable body of riders could provide for. The others at the station consisted of stable men and stock herders, while at least a dozen hangers-on were always there, ready for any work or adventure.

The pony riders had their cabins scattered about wherever they had chosen to settle, and these cabins were occupied by cliques of two, three, or more, as they cared to live together.

Among the riders were men whose names have come down to us in history, and with three of these this very veracious romance will have to deal, viz., Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill,* and Pony Bob.**

These three pards, known as "The Three Invincibles," and as "The Centaurs of the Trail," always were ready for most perilous runs on the whole trail, Wild Bill going eastward from headquarters ranch a hundred miles and back; Buffalo Bill westward a little over a hundred miles and back; and Pony Bob starting from where Will Cody left off and going on westward for ninety miles and back to his starting-point at Valley Farm Station, which was presided over by a stock-tender known as "Gentleman George" Ross and his daughter, whom all the pony riders affectionately called "Little Sunbeam."

What had brought George Ross and his beautiful daughter, Lena, to that wild and then remote region, no one could determine, for both father and child were well educated and refined, yet still were content to live a life of self-denial, danger and hardship, and, while all the pony riders admired and respected the man, all of them who were fancy free and heart whole were in love with Little Sunbeam.

All along the trail, from twelve to twenty miles, according to the nature of the country, there were relays, or stations, containing from a dozen to a score of horses, and cared for by from two to three stock-tenders to look after the animals, be ready for the pony riders in their rapid flights, and to guard the stock from raids of Indians, renegades, and trail bandits.

These relays were always well located for defense, and also with an eye to plentiful grass and water for the stock, while the cabins and stockades were as strong as forts.

At Headquarters' Ranch Captain Nat Starbuck was "king," as we have intimated. One time a soldier, then an army scout, then a miner, and lastly a stage-driver, he was the very man for the important position he held.

Tall, manly, utterly fearless, level-headed, and with perfect control over himself, he ran the division under his command with strict military discipline, and was both loved and feared by his men.

He permitted no trifling with duty; his word was law; he held at once the power of commander, magistrate, and agent, and, when need be, his word would send a man to a death on the gallows, for

those were days and conditions when men of necessity made their own laws in that wild land.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MASKED UNKNOWN.

Buffalo Bill had ridden but a couple of miles, when, in dashing into a narrow canyon, he saw the leading horses suddenly check their speed and come to a halt.

Of course it could mean but one thing, and that was that there was danger ahead, some one barring the way.

At once he drew his revolver and rode forward to get the outlaw's rifle from the horse that had been in the lead.

But just then, around the bend of the canyon, appeared a horse and rider.

The horse was as black as jet, and so was the rider, the saddle not being visible.

The rider was a woman, dressed in a black habit and with a sable cloak thrown about her shoulders and falling all about her.

She wore a black slouch hat and plume and a mask that completely concealed her face and neck, while her hands were gloved so that Buffalo Bill could not have told whether she was white, black, or red-skin.

But he knew at once that it was the mysterious guide, wholly unknown to him, whose letters of warning had time and again saved his life, who had guided him around dangers that threatened, and only a short half-hour before had prevented his running into a death-trap.

Raising his hat with marked respect and courtesy, he said:

"We meet again, fair guide."

"You do not know whether I am fair or not," was the answer, in a low, strangely soft and melodious tone.

"I could guess at it, even did I not know; but you forget that I once saw your face when you came to the Headquarters Ranch one night as a witness in my behalf, at the time I killed Pony Rider Fearless Frank."

"True, for an instant you saw it, but you do not know me, and so let it be."

"I am not here to discuss myself, but you and your fellow pony riders."

"Let me thank you for all that you have done for me, for just now you saved me."

"I am glad that I can do some good amid all the evil," she said bitterly, and then quickly added:

"But you have done well, for you left the Cloven Hoofs afoot, I see."

"Having warned you, I came here by a short trail I know to warn you in person that the king of the Cloven Hoofs was not killed, as I supposed and wrote you."

"The bullet that I thought had taken his life glanced on the skull, and he is again in the saddle for evil."

"You followed my directions, and led your Pony Riders' Patrol against the Cloven Hoofs' retreat, but though you wiped out one den, there is another, and to this the wounded chief was borne, and there he had other men, who are only too willing to follow his lead, for, if cruel and a hard master, he is one to get money for them, and that is what all men are after, many not being particular as to the means."

"So I came here to tell you that when I will try and serve you in the future with warnings, I may not be able to do so as often as I could wish, so you must keep your eyes open constantly for deadly danger."

"I sincerely thank you; but will you let me ask you why you, born to a life so far different, will remain among outlaws?"

"It is my destiny, and I can give you no other answer for what I do."

"Who I am, and what I am you need not know, for to you, as to others, I must remain unknown."

"But there is one thing you can tell me."

"Yes?"

"Who is Gentleman George, the stock-tender?"

"I know no more of him than his name."

"He has a daughter?"

"Yes; Little Sunbeam."

"Does she ever leave the station alone?" Buffalo Bill was about to say:

"Yes, frequently, for she is a great huntress."

But he checked himself, not knowing the woman's design in asking the question, and replied:

"She used to do so, but it is against her father's wishes now, as the Cloven Hoofs made the trail so dangerous."

"Some day I wish to see that girl face to face," said the unknown woman, as though speaking to herself rather than to the pony rider.

Then she added, quickly:

"But I have warned you, and I must not detain you, for I know that you pony riders go on time."

"Remember that the Cloven Hoofs are abroad again for mischief, but that I have warned you, I must ask that you keep as a secret from all—no one must know, unless it cannot be avoided."

"You may expect warnings when I can give them, but be ever on the alert for a death-shot, and though you appear to bear a charmed life, you are as human as other men."

"Good-by."

Buffalo Bill would have detained her longer, but, with a wave of her hand, she wheeled and darted swiftly away, and he rode on once more, driving the captured horses before him and wondering at the strange woman who yet remained unknown to him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WAGER.

"I do not understand Buffalo Bill's being behind time to-day, for since the attack on the Cloven Hoofs' retreat there have been no outlaws seen upon the trail."

"You saw no suspicious signs, did you, Wild Bill, as you came along yesterday?"

"None, sir; and I will take a few men and go in search of Cody if you wish, for he is nearly an hour late," responded Wild Bill, in answer to what Captain Starbuck had said.

"I confess I am a little anxious, and you may do so, sir," and he whispered the words, "Buffalo Bill carries a large sum of money this run, and you are to take it on through."

"I will make a try at it, sir," was the reply of Wild Bill, who was a tall, splendidly built man, promising great strength and endurance, and with a face that was a most striking one, strong in character, daring to recklessness, and with a smile constantly hovering under his long dark mustache that had a tinge of bitterness in it and was strangely cynical.

"Here he comes, now!" shouted one of the group of pony riders and stablemen gathered about headquarters to see the coming rider arrive at the fort, and the other, Wild Bill, depart with the express he should bring.

"No, it is a party of horsemen," called out another, as a dust swept around the distant bend, and a number of horses were visible in the cloud that was swiftly coming along.

"The horses have no riders, and I'll wager big money Buffalo Bill is pushing them along," said Wild Bill.

All eyes were now upon the cloud of dust sweeping along the trail, and in which indistinctly visible were half a dozen or more riderless horses.

"The animals have saddles on them!" cried Captain Starbuck, turning his field-glass upon them.

"It's a herd of road agents' or Indians' horses that Buffalo Bill has run in—ten to one on it!" cried Wild Bill, waving a roll of bills over his head and facing the crowd.

"For the fun of bucking against you, Wild Bill, I take the bet, for no man backs me down on chance," said a tall, heavily bearded man who had lately come to the ranch and taken the position of "clerk" to the fort, his duties causing him to act as commissary, quartermaster, paymaster, storekeeper and landlord of the little tavern.

* J. B. Hickok, soldier, pony rider, scout, and guide, killed at Deadwood nine years ago by Jack McCall, who was hanged for the cowardly deed.

** Robert H. Haslam, now of Chicago, Ill., where he is leading a quiet life as a merchant, though still known to many as "Pony Bob."

Captain Starbuck had not needed such an assistant, but he was a relative of some one of the company, and had been forwarded to the post as a means of getting rid of him.

With any other man there in command than Captain Nat Starbuck, Burke Bradshaw, as he was called, would very quickly have taken full control, for he had started off in that way from the first.

But Nat Starbuck had very quickly called him down in a quiet and firm way there was no mistaking, and he had decided to take second place to avoid trouble.

"Name your limit, Bradshaw," said Wild Bill, and he held out his money.

"I say I take you at ten dollars to a hundred, as you offered, that Buffalo Bill is not there, and has made no capture of stock," cried Bradshaw.

Wild Bill quickly handed his stake of a hundred dollars to Captain Starbuck, Burke Bradshaw doing the same, and this bet added greater interest to the coming cavalcade.

The horses were sweeping along now at full speed directly for the post, yet fully a quarter of a mile distant.

Several were in the lead, and upon these could be seen saddles.

The dust they left behind them made a cloud the eye could not penetrate, but that there were a number of other animals was evident.

The clatter of hoofs soon reached the ears of the waiting men, and then the cavalcade dashed upon a piece of meadow land where there was no dust, and the forms of eight horses were seen.

"There are eight of them," cried a pony rider.

"And one has a rider," said Wild Bill, with his peculiar smile.

"Yes, and one carries a pack saddle.

"And on one there is a dead body, or I'm a liar."

"Burke Bradshaw, do you recognize that man in the rear?" asked Captain Starbuck.

"Buffalo Bill!" cried a score of voices.

"That don't prove he captured those horses," sullenly said Burke Bradshaw, as he saw a hundred dollars slipping away from him which he had risked but ten to win.

A few more minutes and Buffalo Bill halted at the fort, while the band of horses were headed off and captured by the stable men.

"Captain Starbuck, the Cloven Hoofs are again on the trail, sir, and I brought in one as a sample, and their horses for you," cried Buffalo Bill, and the cheer that greeted his words proved to Burke Bradshaw that his having lost his bet pleased those about him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECRET REPORT.

"Here is your money, Wild Bill," and Captain Starbuck handed over the stakes the pony rider had won.

Then, turning to Buffalo Bill, he continued: "What was the trouble, Cody?"

"I found I was hemmed in, sir, when I got to Crescent Basin, and my only means of escape was to desert my horse and take to the cliff."

"I didn't know it was possible to scale the cliffs out of that valley," said Burke Bradshaw.

"I didn't know that you were posted as to what could be done in this country," sharply answered Buffalo Bill, turning upon him.

"I have heard the men assert time and again that there was no way out save by the passes."

"Well, I got out, for I lassoed a tree and climbed to the top of the cliff, and I didn't leave my Express pouches or saddle and bridle behind me."

"You always have a way of surmounting a difficulty, Cody," Captain Starbuck said, and added:

"But what did you do then?"

"I started on foot, sir, came upon the horses the outlaws had left outside the basin, and over which there was one man as guard.

"We had a falling out, as I did not care to hoof it, and so I brought him along."

"You are the luckiest man on earth, and I begin to feel as the men do, that you bear a charmed life, Buffalo Bill."

"No, sir; it is only luck and good management, I guess.

"But I saw eight outlaws, counting that one, and there must have been three at the lower pass and four at the upper one, for they came thus divided, for, hearing the shots where their horses had been left, they ran there, and one animal I lost, while you see that saddle horn caught a bullet."

"Well, that is as modest a report of a very daring deed as I ever heard given.

"Now, Wild Bill, I will give you your instructions," and calling the pony rider apart, the manager gave him certain orders in a low tone, handed him the pouches Buffalo Bill had brought in, and then called out:

"All ready—go!"

At the word Wild Bill leaped into his saddle and was off like a rocket, followed by a cheer from his comrades, while Buffalo Bill walked away to the headquarters cabin with Captain Starbuck.

Burke Bradshaw also accompanied them, but the Captain said:

"I wish to see Cody alone, Bradshaw, so you can leave your duties until later."

Bradshaw turned away with a scowl on his brow, yet said politely:

"Certainly, sir; but I thought you wished me to write down this report of Buffalo Bill's."

"No; I will do that; but you can put down to Cody's credit eight horses and their equipments, captured by him, and which the company will take off his hands at the regular price."

With this Captain Starbuck went on into the cabin with Buffalo Bill, to whom he said:

"Sit down, Bill, and let me hear what else you have to tell, for I did not get it all."

"Captain Starbuck, the King of the Cloven Hoofs is not dead, as we supposed, for he it was who led the outlaws' attack on me to-day," said Buffalo Bill, earnestly.

"Not dead, Cody?" the surprised agent said.

"No, sir."

"But I thought surely that he was, for you told me that the last communication you had, months ago, from your mysterious guide, was that she confessed that she had killed him."

"So she wrote, sir."

"Yet it was not so?"

"It was a mistake, sir."

"You know this?"

"I saw him, sir, and more, it was his horse I mounted in running off with the other animals, but he was shot under me."

"It had a superb saddle and bridle on, a cloak and some other things which I had to give up, as I very nearly failed making a connection with another mount as it was."

"Well, you astound me, yet I cannot doubt you, as you are not the man to make mistakes.

"You saw the King, you say?"

"Yes, sir; closer than I cared to, under the circumstances, I assure you."

"And left him dismounted with his men—seven of them, you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"That means they will be again on the trail of the pony riders."

"Yes, sir."

"I am sorry, for you have every risk so much as it is, and with the Cloven Hoof King again on the trail with his band of cutthroats it means that the little burying ground up the valley will soon have new graves in it."

"We must take our chances, sir."

"Yes, but now you will not have the benefit of the warnings of your mysterious guide."

"Captain Starbuck, you must not repeat it to any one, but I report to you in secret that the unknown guide is again on

the trail, for she warned me of my danger to-day—more I cannot tell you, sir."

"Well, I'm completely upset at what you tell me, and most of all that the mysterious guide, who said that she had killed the King of the Cloven Hoofs should again turn up just as that outlaw leader arrives, as it were from the grave, and appears upon the trail.

"But you are tired and need rest, Cody, so get your dinner and go to bed, and I will see you again at supper time."

Buffalo Bill left the cabin and as he stepped out upon the shelter in front of the quarters, he saw Burke Bradshaw sitting there.

That he had that moment taken his seat there Buffalo Bill was glad to feel, but that he had come as an eavesdropper he felt assured, and he said as he passed him:

"I have finished my report, Bradshaw, so the Captain is at liberty now, as you seem anxious to see him."

"Yes, I am, for there is a big error in my accounts somewhere," and Bradshaw entered the cabin.

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER SUSPICION.

"See here, Bradshaw, where were you just now when Cody was in here with me?" angrily said Captain Starbuck as the clerk entered his quarters.

"I came over to consult you, sir, and met Cody just leaving."

"I told you that I wished to see him alone, and if you do not understand English I will be your teacher, for I meant alone."

"I beg pardon, Captain Starbuck, but I did not know Buffalo Bill was still here until I heard voices as I approached, and I determined to wait; but just then he came out."

"Well, what do you wish?"

"I have made an error in my accounts, I fear, sir, so would like to get the month's papers from you again, sir, to go over them once more."

"Get them," and Captain Starbuck handed him a key to a large desk in the room, his face still clouded, for he was not particularly pleased with the "general utility" man the company had sent him, though he found him a thorough accountant, a good worker, and most willing to do all he could to relieve him of worry.

Still, there was something about Burke Bradshaw that he did not like, and as the latter was going out with a bundle of papers he had taken from the desk, he said:

"See here, Bradshaw, your duties are not to meddle with the pony riders, but simply to do the work of bookkeeper and keep the accounts of the company straight."

"I will attend to the rest."

"I did not intend to meddle, sir."

"No; but I have noticed that of late you have given orders to the riders when it was not your business to do so. You have refused several of them an advance asked for, saying they were overdrawn and had gambled their money away and declined credit at the store."

"Now, the riders are men, and if they wish to gamble their wages off, it is none of your affair, and I will advance them money whenever they wish so long as the sum is within reason, while they can have full credit at the store to the amount of two months' pay."

"I have never lost a dollar through a pony rider yet, and death has cancelled money owed them until the company is far ahead, so come to me when a man asks a favor and not take it upon yourself to refuse."

"See how it is with Cody, now, for he has just brought in a number of horses and equipments to be credited to him, and he has done the same thing before, as have also Wild Bill and Pony Bob and others, while in special rewards they have earned more than their pay, and if they would share with a fellow rider in hard luck the Overland Company can do the same, especially when you, its clerk, are the one

who wins most of the money the poor fellows lose in gambling.

"I have no more to say just now, Bradshaw," and the clerk left the cabin with a courteous salute, but if Captain Starbuck had seen his face it would have told him that Burke Bradshaw was a man who never forgave a slight, a reprimand, or a wrong.

An hour after Bradshaw returned with the papers, and said, pleasantly:

"I found the error, captain."

"I am sorry to have troubled you, sir."

"It was no trouble to me, Bradshaw, but to you, if you had to go through all those accounts."

"Every one of them, sir; for, as usual, when you are looking for anything, it was the last one that I put my hands on," and having returned the papers to the desk and given the key to the captain, the clerk went to his own quarters.

Captain Starbuck then arose, walked over to the large, strongly-made desk—some of his own handiwork, and took out the papers Burke Bradshaw had just replaced.

Each paper was taken out separately, and the string around it was closely regarded.

"Not one of those knots has been untied, for there is my tell-tale tie, as I left it, and he did not want the papers, but took that as an excuse for his coming here."

"I saw his shadow fall across the doorway when he came upon the piazza, so he heard nothing."

"Somehow, I do not like the man, and he has never given me cause to complain before to-day, when I raked him over at assuming too much authority."

"He helps me greatly, and is the very man for the place, but somehow I doubt him and dislike him; yes, I am afraid of the man."

He gave a shrill call on a whistle, and soon after the man who acted as his servant entered, strangely womanly in appearance, but a good cook and splendid servant generally.

He had drifted westward in some way, but was mild-mannered in his way, and shunned the men as though afraid of them, but answered promptly to the nickname they had given him of "Jane," and, in fact, he was known by no other name.

"Jane, go and find Little Lone Star and tell him I wish to see him," said the captain, as "Jane" appeared.

CHAPTER X.

"JANE."

Little Lone Star, the pony rider, got his name from hailing from Texas.

He was a man under size, but as fearless of danger as though he was a giant, and his face was bright, intelligent, and determined.

He always wore a half-Mexican suit and embroidered sombrero, from the fact that he had lived so long in Mexico, but the five-pointed gold star on his hat showed that he was not of the land of the "Eagle and the Serpent."

Jane delivered the message of Captain Starbuck to him, finding him in the cabin which he occupied, with two comrades, Happy Harper, a man who seemed always in a good humor with the world and himself, and Devil Dan, so called from the fact that he was always playing jokes and there was nothing he would not do.

"I'll come at once, Jane," he said, and Little Lone Star accompanied the messenger.

They had walked along in silence for some distance, when Lone Star suddenly said:

"See here, Jane, this is a tough place for a woman."

"What made you come here?"

The face of Jane flushed at the unexpected words, then paled; but with a quiet manner the answer was:

"One would imply from your words, Lone Star, that because my nickname is Jane you think I must be a woman."

"By the star of Texas, I do!" was the blunt reply.

"Oh, no; I am just what I appear—Jane, the captain's man of all work."

"See here, I do not believe it; for in spite of that short crop of shaggy hair and the garb you wear as a man, I believe you are a woman."

"Why, you have really beautiful features, which you in vain try to disguise, and I wish to say just this, that I am sorry you are here, for this is no place for one reared as you have been, no matter what may have driven you to such a life."

"Lone Star, I have a great favor to ask of you," and Jane spoke with deep earnestness.

"Well?"

"Breathe to no one else what you have said about me, I beg of you."

"There are others who think as I do, for, like me, they use their eyes for all they are worth."

"Who are they?"

"Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill."

"Any one else?"

"No, I think not."

"I am glad, for if any one else thought so I might have a great deal of worry."

"You will find friends, Jane, be you man or woman, in Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and myself, but keep even more to yourself than you do, if you are what I suspect."

"Which I am not; but I thank you, and I shall regard you as a friend, Lone Star," and Jane turned off toward his own cabin, as Lone Star went on into the headquarters, where Captain Starbuck was awaiting him.

"Ah! Little Lone Star, come in, for I wish to talk with you."

"Yes, captain."

"You heard what Buffalo Bill said to-day about the outlaws?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you think about it?"

"That Buffalo Bill did a mighty clever piece of work, sir, in dodging death and bringing in those horses, one with a dead rider across the saddle."

"Yes, it is his style; but do you think we are going to have more trouble with them?"

"This is a pretty sure indication that we are, to my way of thinking."

"You were with the Pony Riders' Patrol that attacked the outlaws' retreat some months ago?"

"Yes, sir, I commanded the Patrol until we met Buffalo Bill, who somewhere had gotten information that enabled him to guide us to the retreat, and I, of course, resigned in his favor, as he ranked me in service."

"Did you not believe the outlaw band was then wiped out?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you failed to find the chief?"

"He had been killed, sir, I was told."

"Well, it was a false report, for he is alive, and I wish you to take a score pony riders and again go over the trail of my division."

"But first ride at once to the old retreat of the outlaws, and see if they have again made their quarters there."

"If not, guide half of your men, under Devil Dan, back over the trail to the end of Wild Bill's run, while you go with the others as far west as our division line extends."

"I understand, sir."

"You see that Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and Pony Bob are now out, and I wish to prevent their being ambushed if possible, while, if the Cloven Hoofs find we are ready to strike at once, we may drive them off."

"It may be, sir, and I will start within half an hour."

"Do so; but there is one thing more, Lone Star."

"Yes, sir."

"I wish you to secretly play the detective upon Burke Bradshaw."

"Your clerk, sir?"

"Yes; for I wish to know more of him and his doings than at present I have been able to find out."

"I understand, sir."

"But mention to no one that I suspect him of anything, and be careful not to arouse his suspicion."

"I will be careful, Captain Starbuck;

and now that you refer to Bradshaw, I will tell you frankly that, though he comes here with the best indorsements, I learn, and is a cousin of the general superintendent, I have suspected him from the first of being a villain."

"If I wrong him, I am sorry, but with your permission to shadow him, I will see if he is or is not playing a double game."

"Lone Star knows more of Bradshaw than he would admit," muttered Captain Starbuck as the Texan pony rider left his quarters.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DESERTED OUTLAW RETREAT.

The Pony Riders' Patrol, under command of Little Lone Star, rode away upon its mission of patrolling the trail as far as the division under Captain Starbuck extended.

There were eighteen men all told, well mounted, armed and carrying along a couple of pack horses with camping outfit and provisions, for the spring days were yet quite cold, and the men needed all the shelter at night that they could get.

They came to the scene where Buffalo Bill had captured the outlaws' horses and killed the man who guarded them, and put to flight a number of wolves that were feeding upon the carcass of the slain horse.

But in vain did they seek for a trail from there, so passed on, following the tracks of the horses leading to the spot.

This trail was made by nine horses, as Lone Star's experienced eyes quickly read, and he decided that it must come from where the outlaws had a retreat, and reasoned that dismounted as they had been by Buffalo Bill capturing their animals, they would naturally go with all speed back to where they could get a remount as quickly as possible.

Pressing rapidly on, Lone Star became convinced that though it did not run parallel with the Pony trail, the one they followed had come from the old retreat where the outlaws had been attacked and defeated.

Convinced of this, he decided, as night was coming on, and they could not see to follow the trail, to take the chances and go at once to the retreat.

All of the men were in favor of this also, and so they pushed on through the night until they reached the shores of a large lake that barred their further way.

But Lone Star was posted, and setting the example rode into the lake, guiding his horse to a rocky and wooded island dimly seen through the darkness.

Wading and swimming at times the horses reached the island and Lone Star said:

"Some of you boys were here in our raid, and remember that we left the large flat boat hidden here when we returned to the fort."

"We will soon see if it has been disturbed."

The boat, a large one of hewn timber, was found where it had been left, and leaving the horses on the island with two men as guards, Lone Star and the others boarded the flat boat and using the sweep vigorously, in half an hour had crossed to the other side, landing on the shores under the shadow of a mountain, and where a canyon penetrated into the range.

Silently they advanced on foot into the canyon and after a walk of half a mile came to the old retreat of the Cloven Hoofs.

There were the cabins, just as Buffalo Bill and his party had left them.

But no smoke curled upward from the rock chimneys, no camp fires were visible, and the retreat was surely deserted.

"Well, boys, we can do no more than return to the island, for surely the Cloven Hoofs have not come back to their old retreat," said Lone Star, after a thorough search of the deserted camp had been made.

So they took up their march back for the island, and just before dawn arrived there, pretty well tired out with their

hard ride and tramp since leaving the post.

Soon after sunrise they were up again, had their breakfast, and, recrossing to the mainland, were once more on the march to regain the pony trail.

Reaching it, the party divided, Devil Dan taking eight men back over the trail to the end of Wild Bill's run, and Lone Star pushing on with his party westward.

To the end of Pony Bob's run went Lone Star and his men, and then they began to retrace their way to the post.

They passed relay station after relay station, but none of the stock-tenders had seen or heard anything of the Cloven Hoofs being on the trail since late the fall before.

It was dawn of the next morning when they reached the station where the man known as Gentleman George Ross was the stock-tender, and dwelt alone with his daughter, Little Sunbeam.

Lone Star had timed his pace so as to get there, as he was well assured of a most tempting breakfast, while he would also have a chance to see the stock-tender's daughter, the beautiful Lena.

The pony riders all "spruced up" as they drew near the station, which was located right in a canyon that widened into a valley behind it, where there was splendid pasturage for the horses, and with a natural barrier around it.

As they rode up to the fort-like cabin and stockade, the pony riders saw Gentleman George and Little Sunbeam standing there, and the former called out:

"Lone Star, something has happened to Buffalo Bill, for he was due at eleven o'clock last night, and has not yet arrived."

This news fell like a damper upon the band of pony riders.

CHAPTER XII.

MISSING.

Lone Star glanced at his comrades at this assertion of Gentleman George, that Buffalo Bill was overdue over six hours.

He was known to be a rider who thought more of being "on time" than any of his comrades, and when he had been, as was now and then the case, delayed, it was found to be for the best of reasons and generally resulted in some triumph for himself, as in the case of his capture of the outlaws' horses and killing of the guard.

"That makes him over six hours late, sir," said Lone Star, addressing Gentleman George with that respect which the man himself demanded, as well as on account of his having a pretty daughter.

"Yes, he is over six hours behind, pard Lone Star, and for Buffalo Bill that means cause for the greatest alarm.

"But dismount, all of you, and come in, for my daughter will give you a good breakfast, and I will supply you with fresh horses, so you can continue on under better circumstances.

"Come, gentlemen, all of you are most welcome," and Gentleman George extended the invitation in a way that showed that he meant it, while Little Sunbeam called out:

"Yes, boys, I'll soon have breakfast for you."

The pony riders knew just how it would be, and they dismounted with alacrity, and, stripping their horses of their saddles and bridles, turned them loose in the valley, while Gentleman George rounded up other animals for them.

The men were very careful to wash their hands and faces with extra care, and brush their long locks and beards, for all save Lone Star wore full beards.

They were soon ready for breakfast, and were delighted at the meal which Little Sunbeam set before them, for there were hot biscuits and butter, for Gentleman George kept his cows, and his daughter delighted in a good dairy.

Then there were some fine beefsteak, venison steaks, quail broiled, roasted potatoes and eggs and bacon, as the Valley Farm had chickens and hogs also upon

it; in fact, Gentleman George was a model farmer, and hence a most perfect housekeeper, while they believed in getting about them all in their power to make home comfortable.

The strongly-built cabin, massive stockade wall across the canyon entrance, the flat roof with its log barrier, made the place a perfect stronghold, which the riders often called Fort Ross, while there were as aids in its defense half a dozen of the largest and most savage dogs to be found in the country.

Lena Ross knew well what hungry riders were, and she cooked breakfast accordingly, making coffee and serving food in unlimited quantities.

They had passed the cabin on their way up and halted only for a minute or two, so she expected their coming back and was prepared for them.

"Well, Gentleman George, I do not know what to think about Cody," said little Lone Star when he had finished what he attested was the "very best breakfast of his life."

"We can only hope that he is all right, but dread the worst, Lone Star."

"But did you see no signs of the Cloven Hoofs on your way west of here?"

"Nothing, and Pony Bob here came in all right," returned Lone Star, referring to a pony rider who had just entered the room, and who was to have met Buffalo Bill there at midnight and taken his freight on to the next change station westward.

"No, all was clear as I came along, and as Buffalo Bill was late and I half sick, Gentleman George made me turn in for a rest, and I enjoyed it, although it breaks me all up to find Bill has not yet come in—yes, thank you, Miss Lena, I feel all right this morning, and will do full justice to your breakfast," and Pony Bob went to work with a will.

"When you came on you saw no signs of the Cloven Hoofs, Lone Star?" asked Gentleman George.

"Only the signs Buffalo Bill had left, where he had killed one outlaw and captured the horses, having one horse shot under him."

"He seems always to do just the right thing and to escape in a most miraculous way."

"You bet he does, Gentleman George, for Buffalo Bill knows what to do and always lights on his feet, no matter how he falls, while he has had more close calls from death than any man I know of; but if you are going eastward Lone Star, I will ride with you, hoping to meet Pard Bill, for of course there is nothing for me to go back westward for until I know why he does not come." And having finished his breakfast Pony Bob went out with the others, and the whole party soon after set off on the trail for Headquarters Ranch.

But mile after mile was gone over, station after station passed, and at last Pony Bob halted with the words:

"I've got to turn back, pards, and report Buffalo Bill missing, and be ready to come through with the next Express."

"You'll take the pouches on from here, Lone Star, and report to Captain Starbuck that I have gone back, but will return to Valley Farm on my next run eastward in time to meet Bill, if he turns up, and God grant he may, or catch there the man who runs in his place."

"Good-by, boys, and find pard Bill, if you can, while if the Cloven Hoofs have downed him I'll give up pony riding to avenge him."

A cheer broke from the pony riders at these words of Pony Bob, and with a wave of his hat the latter wheeled his horse and dashed back over the trail to spread at each station he passed the sad news that Buffalo Bill was missing.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUFFALO BILL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Buffalo Bill had seemed a little surprised when he reported at the post for his next run to find that Captain Star-

buck had sent Lone Star off with a Pony Riders' Patrol to go the length of his division and look out for outlaws.

He knew that the feeling that prompted the captain to send the guard was to protect him, Wild Bill and Pony Bob from an ambush, fearing that, as the Cloven Hoofs had returned to their old acts of outlawry, a pony rider would very quickly become a victim of their red deeds.

Wild Bill, however, came in on time, and he reported all clear along his trail, and also said, with a smile:

"I've got the pouches, captain, but they go through empty, for this run; there is not even a letter in them."

"Then if the Cloven Hoofs ambush me, all they will get this run will be my life," responded Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"Which is more precious than any freight, Cody," quickly said the captain, and with a leap into his saddle, Buffalo Bill was away.

He had not gone many miles before he saw a party of horsemen ahead.

At once he drew rein, for though he was on the watch for the returning patrol, he also knew that those he saw might be Cloven Hoofs, and it was best to be careful.

He always carried a small field-glass swung to his belt, and bringing this to bear upon the horsemen, he at once resumed his run, for he recognized his comrades.

It was the party of Devil Dan returning from the hunt after the Cloven Hoofs, and soon he was in their midst.

"Any signs, Dan?" he called out, as the boys greeted him with a cheer.

Devil Dan told what they had done, and that Lone Star and his party had gone on to the end of the division, while he was to patrol Wild Bill's run.

"Well, they have not gone back to their old retreat, that is certain, but have found another one," said Buffalo Bill, when he had heard what Devil Dan had to report.

"I'll meet Lone Star, Dan, and tell him when I meet you—good-by, boys!" and Buffalo Bill was off again at full speed.

He had passed through Wolf Den Pass, a fatal spot in the past, for the pony riders had left a couple of stations behind him, and halted at what was known as Monument Rock, to give his horse a swallow of water at a brook that crossed the trail, when his eyes fell upon something that at once riveted his attention.

The brook ran through a pretty valley, heavily timbered, in fact, so dense was the undergrowth that the sun seldom penetrated there, and the spot was dark and somber.

Just across the brook in the center of the little valley was a rock that towered above the trees, coming up from the ground like a tall shaft erected by man.

It was shrunken by nature into a shaft, and did indeed look like a monument.

And a monument it was, for in that valley had a wagon train once come to grief, the settlers having been murdered by the Indians, and long after the bones had been gathered and buried there.

At another time a company of cavalry and a band of Indians had fought fiercely in the valley, and the bodies of the dead, redskin and soldier alike, had been buried under the shadow of the rock.

Then several pony riders also lay sleeping their last sleep close to its base, in the shade of the somber valley and with the waters of the brook murmuring a requiem to the dead.

But it was not the monument that the eyes of Buffalo Bill rested upon.

He had seen it hundreds of times before. Nor was it the mound over the slain emigrants of the train.

Nor the graves of the soldiers or the redskins.

And still it was not the little mounds that marked where rested his three dead pony rider comrades, shot down there by the Cloven Hoofs.

He had often gazed sadly upon them and wondered if he, too, was some day to fall by the way, shot down by ambushed outlaws.

What now caught his eye was a broad trail down through the little valley.

It was beyond the Monument Rock, and came from the southward and went northward.

It was a trail that was very fresh, and it was made not only by horses, but by wagons.

Quickly Buffalo Bill rode to it and halted where it crossed the pony trail.

"It is the trail of a wagon train, and it has not passed here more than an hour or two.

"What does it mean?"

"Why, what can it mean, going in this direction, but that the guide is lost and is going straight up into the Indian country.

"This will never do, for a massacre will follow.

"I will overtake it and turn it back," and the pony rider wheeled up the valley and went dashing along on the strange trail.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STRANGE TRAIL.

Buffalo Bill was intensely surprised at the strange trail he had found in Monument Rock Valley.

He had heard of no emigrant train coming to that part of the West, and in the face of the dangers to be encountered he could not believe that settlers had intentionally sought that wild land, especially in such small force as the tracks he was following showed them to be.

They might be Mormons, it was true, but then they must not be allowed to run into peril any more than Gentiles.

It was true that the Mormons were not at war with the Indians, or, to put it more as it really was, the Indians did not war against the followers of Brigham Young, as they knew there was trouble between them and the Government.

But the Indians would not recognize a wagon train as Mormons, or stop to consider who they were, so long as they were pale-faces.

That the trail led in the direction it did was proof to Buffalo Bill that those who controlled its movements were going wrong, either intentionally or were at fault.

He was on duty as a pony rider, but the duty to humanity called for him to turn aside.

Did he go on to the next station, and send one of the stock-tenders after the train, with the start it then had, and night not far off, it would be too late.

Congratulating himself that he was going through that day with empty pouches, with no especial and important papers or freight, Buffalo Bill pressed on after the train.

Eying the trail closely, he soon found out that it showed the tracks of four large wagons, a smaller one, and a vehicle that must be an ambulance.

There were the tracks of perhaps half a hundred driven horses, while the wagons were drawn by mules, as the tracks showed.

"This should give them about twenty or thirty people, a small number to resist attack from a large band of Indians.

"I may be wrong, but there has been so much of guides leading wagon trains astray and to their destruction, I fear this is a case of that kind," mused Buffalo Bill, as he rode along.

Out of Monument Rock Valley he passed and the trail led into a canyon penetrating the mountains.

"The man that guides this train has been this way before and knows where he is going," muttered the pony rider, and adding a moment after:

"He is going where every man, woman and child in the outfit will be massacred if they continue on many miles further."

The trail continued on through the canyon on a rocky roadway that hardly left the trace of a mark of wheels or hoofs, but Buffalo Bill pushed on, and after a few miles came out into a broad valley.

There, several miles distant, he beheld the wagon train, pulling along towards a distant range of mountains.

Still keeping up his flying gait, in a short while he overtook the drove of stock being driven at the rear of the train by several men and boys.

They looked at him with evident surprise, and he asked:

"Ho, pard, which way are you going?"

"To a settlement the guide is taking us to," answered one of the men.

"Who is your guide?"

"We know him only as Kit the Guide."

"Where is he?"

"On ahead with Captain Tom's wagon and ambulance, for they set the pace."

"You stop your horses here, for I will go ahead and turn the wagons back."

"What, are we going wrong, friend?" asked the man, with surprise and anxiety.

"I rather think you are."

"Stop here until I have seen your captain and the guide," and Buffalo Bill rode rapidly on once more.

He found the wagons toiling along, drawn by mules, as he had discovered by the hoof-tracks, saw men driving them, and women and children in them.

There were old men and old women, too, going to this new land, and babes in arms, while others in the full vigor of manhood and youth rode alongside of the wagons.

Counting them as he rode along, Buffalo Bill muttered to himself:

"Thirty-seven, so far, and all food for Indian deviltry if they went far on this trail."

Asking one of the horsemen where the captain was, he was told that he was with the two wagons and the ambulance a quarter of a mile ahead.

"I will ride on and see him, and, as he will turn back, you had best stop here and turn about, ready for a retreat."

"Are we going wrong, sir?" asked one of the men, quickly.

"Yes."

"But we have the best guide on the frontier."

"Not if he brought you this way, for there lies the Indian country in that range yonder," and Buffalo Bill rode rapidly on once more to overtake those ahead.

CHAPTER XV.

"CAPTAIN TOM."

Buffalo Bill soon came up with the vehicles in advance, and found two wagons and an ambulance.

In the latter was a man not in frontier costume, but neatly dressed in a corduroy suit, and wearing a soft, round hat.

He was a fine-looking man of forty-five, and his face was intelligent, his bearing dignified and courteous.

By his side in the ambulance sat a young girl, neatly dressed and wearing a soft felt sun hat.

Her face was that of a girl of seventeen, and very pretty, and her form was elegant and graceful, but her looks and manners were those of the city-bred girl.

There were in each of the wagons a couple of men dressed as frontiersmen, but which, however, did not disguise that they were tenderfeet.

"May I ask, sir, if you are in charge of this train?" and Buffalo Bill reined up his horse alongside of the ambulance, raising his hat politely as he did so.

"I am supposed to be, sir, though really being what you call out here a tenderfoot; I leave all to our guide," was the answer.

"Permit me to say, then, sir, that your guide is on the wrong trail."

"Indeed!"

"I can hardly believe that, for he is a perfect plainsman, sir."

"He may be that, sir, and yet be going wrong."

"But for what purpose, for he is in my pay to guide us right?"

"Where would you go, sir?"

"I had heard of a settlement near a Pony Express station known as Pony Riders' Ranch, where it was said there is fine land for cultivation and stock-raising, and as my friends who accompany me were willing to follow my fortunes, we were seeking that point."

"I am from Pony Riders' Ranch, sir, and left it at noon, for I am a pony rider bearing Express, and it was from seeing your trail cross the pony trail that I knew something was wrong, and followed you."

"I took the liberty of halting your wagons in the rear until I could turn you back."

The parties had now all gotten out of the vehicles, and stood regarding Buffalo Bill with marked interest, and the captain of the train said:

"But why may you not be the one who is wrong, and our guide be right?"

"I might be, sir; but I am not."

"I know this country thoroughly, and ride the pony trail daily, and I tell you, sir, frankly, that your guide is either lost or he is a traitor, and would lead you to your death."

"Strong words, my friend."

"I will repeat them to his face, sir."

"You say you are a pony rider?"

"I am, sir."

"May I ask your name, for mine is Thomas Starbuck."

"Ah! the same as my captain, sir, for his is Nat Starbuck; but my name is Buffalo Bill, or rather, William F. Cody, though out here they call me by my nickname."

"Buffalo Bill?"

"I have heard our guide speak of you—yes, and others; it seems, too, that I have seen the name of Buffalo Bill in the papers."

"Perhaps so, sir; but I have heard Captain Starbuck speak of a rich cousin of his by the name of Thomas Starbuck."

"Once rich, but now poor, my friend, for I lost all my money by the unfortunate speculations of others, and so decided to find a home in the far West and start life anew, my daughter here and myself, while my friends in this train are people who worked for me, and, going down in the crash, decided to cast their lot with mine; so here we all are, and you have our history. But, you know my cousin, Nat Starbuck, then?"

"I know him well, sir, and he will be delighted to welcome you, while you could not find a better place to settle than in Pony Ranch Valley."

"I have not seen Nat since we were boys, but heard where he was, and so decided to look him up."

"You would never find him upon this trail, sir, and as it is growing late, I beg you to turn back and retrace your way with all speed, for I will guide you to the Overland Pony trail, and you can camp there and follow it to-morrow to the ranch."

"But our guide has gone on ahead and bade us come to a camp he would pick out for us."

"My dear sir, I repeat my words, that you would but follow him to your destruction, for in that mountain range yonder lies the Indian country, and he is leading you directly, either through gross ignorance or from intention."

"I beg you to turn back now, before it is too late."

"What do you say, my friends?" and Thomas Starbuck turned to the men with him, but before they could answer, his daughter cried earnestly:

"Do as this gentleman says, father, for you know I have never trusted Kit Kirby from the start."

"What did you say the man's name was, miss?" quickly asked Buffalo Bill.

"Kit Kirby, sir."

"I know a man by that name, and he was known as Kit Kirby the Red Danite, and as Red Hand the Danite Captain, on account of his red deeds."

"He was a deserter from the army, a renegade chief of the Indians, a Mormon, and later an outlaw; but my pard Wild Bill captured him last fall; he was tried by Captain Nat Starbuck, found guilty, and hanged, so your Kit Kirby cannot be the man I refer to, but some one who has taken his name."

"Well, the guide has seen us halt, and is returning to see the reason," said one of the men, and Buffalo Bill saw a man coming rapidly back toward the train.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRAITOR GUIDE.

If the people of the wagon train had expected to see Buffalo Bill change even at the coming of the guide, and show the "white feather," they were very much mistaken.

Not a muscle of his handsome face moved, and he said, in his quiet way:

"Mr. Starbuck, I will lead my horse beyond that wagon and keep out of view myself, while you say to the guide that you feel you are wrong and ask him to turn back.

"I will hear what he has to say, and be on hand at the proper time."

"I will do as you wish, sir, though it seems strange to take the word of a stranger against one who has proven himself a most faithful guide."

"I will be answerable to him, sir, and to you, if I go wrong."

"Trust this gentleman, father, for I feel that the guide has been deceiving us," said Ada Starbuck, while one of the men added:

"I say so, too, Cap'n Tom."

"I will do as you wish, as I said," Captain Tom responded, though he evidently still had faith in his guide.

So Buffalo Bill went into hiding and a few minutes after the guide came up.

"My God!" said Buffalo Bill, as he caught sight of the man through a tear in the wagon covering.

"The grave this time has surely given up its dead, for that is Red Hand the Danite Captain in the flesh, a spirit, and I saw him hanged four months ago."

"Why has yer halted here, cap'n, when I told yer I was goin' ter find yer a first-rate camp fer ther night?" said the guide as he approached, and his tone was one of anger at having to return a mile or more on foot, as he had left his horse with the train.

He was a tall man, over six feet in height, of most muscular build, and with a wonderful quickness of movement for one of his size.

He was roughly dressed in striped pants, stuck in the top of heavy boots, a blue woolen shirt and a slouch hat, while he carried in his belt no fewer than four revolvers, two on each side, without holsters, and a long-bladed knife behind.

His hair, short beard, and mustache were unkempt, and his face was bronzed to the hue of leather.

The face was a bold one, might once have been handsome, and yet was marred by the evil lurking in the piercing, deep-set eyes, and the almost savage expression about the mouth.

"I thought we might be wrong, guide, and, as there was a doubt, I decided to halt, and when you returned go back."

"Go back be blowed! What am I here fer? Don't I know my biz? You'll go where I guide yer!"

The words were jerked out, and the voice was harsh and angry, while the eyes fairly flamed.

The man had never shown such a manner or look before, but had been all gentleness.

"I will not go on, for, from what I have heard, the Indians must be in yonder range," declared Captain Tom, firmly.

"The redskins is all through this country. In yonder range is the Pony Riders' Ranch, an' that's whar I'm guidin' yer, so start up ther outfit, as I wants ter go in camp about four miles from here."

"I prefer to put back, guide, to the well-defined trail we crossed some ten miles back."

"That's a Injun trail, and I guesses you would git hades if you follered it. So, come, I says, again; don't stand here, but push ahead!"

"Hands up, Kit Kirby the Danite!" cried Buffalo Bill, coming suddenly out from behind one of the wagons, and covering the guide.

There was a startled cry, a muttered execration, but the hands went up quickly above the head of the false guide, while from the lips of the treacherous Danite came distinctly:

"My God! You are Buffalo Bill, the Pony Express rider!"

It was a striking picture, for there stood Buffalo Bill, perfectly unmoved, his cocked revolvers covering the man before him, who stood with upraised hands and livid face, not daring to touch one of the four revolvers in his belt, while Captain Tom Starbuck, with Ada leaning upon his arm and the several train men present, stood watching for the outcome of the strange scene. All had heard the Mormon guide's words, which proved that the stranger was indeed Buffalo Bill, the pony rider, as he had claimed to be.

"Yes, I am Buffalo Bill, the pony rider, and you are—"

"Kirby, a guide, so why does yer hold me up?"

"Where are you guiding these people to?"

"They wants to settle here."

"They wish to settle on the land, not under it, and you were guiding them into a trap, for the Indians are in ambush for them right ahead, I'll stake my life on it."

"It's a lie! it's a lie!" yelled the man.

"I never quarrel with a dying man, Kit Kirby, and that's what you are," was Buffalo Bill's significant reply.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RETREAT.

"Come, you are my prisoner, so I'll take those weapons."

"I'll give 'em to you," cried the guide, and he started to lower his hands when the voice of Buffalo Bill rang out:

"Hold your hands up, sir, or I pull trigger."

"I'll disarm you," and stepping forward he quickly threw one after the other of the weapons from the belt to the ground.

"May I ask for a lariat, sir?"

"Certainly."

"I will aid you to bind him," said Captain Tom, now thoroughly convinced of the treachery of his hitherto trusted guide.

"No, sir; I can bind him, as I have had more experience in such things," answered Buffalo Bill, and the manner in which he coiled the lasso about the man's body, gridironing his hands and then his feet, showed that he had indeed had "experience."

"Give him a place in one of the wagons, sir, and let one man keep his eye upon him, for he is as slippery as an eel."

"You know the man then, sir?"

"I knew a man, s I told you, bearing his name, but he was hanged in the Ranch Valley four months ago."

"This man is the image of him, the same size, and has his voice, while he also bears his name, so it remains to be seen whether we hanged the wrong man or not, sir."

"At any rate, this fellow has also placed his head in the noose by his act of treachery to you."

"Let me urge that you at once turn back."

"I will do so, sir; and you must pardon me for doubting you, but that man has been as gentle as a dove up to his break-out a while since, and thoroughly faithful, while he saved my life only yesterday at the risk of his own."

"How was that, sir?"

"I was away from the train and Indians, five of them, surrounded me, when he attacked them single handed."

Buffalo Bill laughed, and then said quickly:

"Pardon me, but if you saw Indians yesterday, and that man ran them off, they were there to meet him and plan an ambush ahead."

"Were any of them killed, sir?"

"No, they ran when he fired upon them."

"You will find, Captain Starbuck, that this is a land of trickery, treachery and danger, sir."

"That man planned to lead you into a trap, and is either an outlaw of the Cloven Hoof band, or he is a renegade pale face dwelling among the redskins."

"Are you ready to move back, sir?"

"Yes, and we are ready to obey your orders."

"Then push on the back trail with all haste," and he added in a low tone:

"I am confident I saw Indians ahead just now, and it is some miles to a place where we can find a good stand-them-off camp."

These words hastened matters considerably and the ambulance and wagons were soon on the back track.

Buffalo Bill galloped on ahead then to hasten the other wagons in turning back, and by the time the party, now in the rear, came up with them, they were all moving at a good pace.

"Drive to the front in your ambulance, Captain Starbuck, and set the pace, for there are Indians where I thought I saw them," said Buffalo Bill.

Captain Tom immediately obeyed, while Buffalo Bill, dropping back in the rear, turned his field glass upon the spot where he had sighted danger.

He had not long to look before he beheld striking proof that he had not been mistaken.

What he beheld was a number of Indians in a run, going from a spot where they had been lying in hiding, over a ridge a mile away, where their horses had been left.

"They could hide themselves, but not their ponies, there, and when your train went into camp in that timber, they would have been very near you, sir," said Buffalo Bill, handing his glass to Captain Starbuck, who had given the reins to his daughter to drive, while he had mounted his horse and ridden back to join Buffalo Bill.

"I see them, sir, and there are quite a number."

"We surely owe you our lives," and Captain Starbuck spoke with feeling.

"I was sure something was wrong, sir, when I saw the wagon tracks crossing the pony trail."

"Yes, there are a couple of hundred of them yonder, at least, and I am sorry we cannot get further on to-night."

"Then we cannot push on?"

"Only to the camp I speak of, and which is a strong position, with water, timber and grass."

"They will head us off if we go further and we will be ambushed."

"How is the train off for weapons?"

"We have plenty of firearms, and ammunition, too."

"And you can rely upon your people?"

"Indeed I can, for though they may be what you call out here tenderfeet, they will fight bravely, as you will see, and I yield the command to you."

"I should go on with my Express, sir, but fortunately I have none of importance this run, and, as there are women and children along, I cannot desert you, nor will I."

"We will go into a fortified camp, I will be missed, they will search for me, see your trail and follow it, and if we can stand off the redskins twenty-four hours we will be all right, for the Pony Riders' Patrol will come to our aid, and they can whip five times their weight in Indians."

"See, the Indians have disappeared over the ridge, so now look out for them to appear mounted."

"But we will reach the camping place well ahead and be ready for them," and Buffalo Bill rode on to the front to urge Ada Starbuck to drive still faster.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TAKING THE CHANCES.

The place where Buffalo Bill intended not only to camp, but to make a stronghold of, was about half a dozen miles from the pony trail.

It was a rise of land with a brook that flowed around it, swift, deep and strong, in the shape of a horseshoe.

No horse or swimmer could cross the stream and reach the rocky shore which the emigrants must defend.

The land end of the place was not three hundred feet wide, and it rose abruptly and presented a bold front of rock.

The rise was well timbered, was about forty feet above the adjacent land, and there was plenty of grass there, while the wagons could be drawn up the steep without a great deal of trouble.

For water, there was the brook which buckets could be lowered into by night, when the Indians could not see the one who was drawing it up, and if forced to stand a longer siege than the night the rifles of the defenders would keep the redskins at a safe distance, for the shore on the other side was barren and sandy, with no places of protection for their foes.

In his observing way Buffalo Bill had taken in the place in passing there once before as the very one for a stronghold, and it had caught his eye again when he was riding swiftly after the train.

Now to reach there was the question, and as he rode by each wagon he called out:

"There is a good camp ahead, so push on with all speed, but drive steadily and don't have a breakdown."

When he came up with the ambulance he saw Ada Starbuck seated in it, the reins held well in hand and her little foot ready upon the brake to be used quickly if needed.

"The wagons are keeping up so well, miss, you might drive a little faster," he said.

"I will, for I feel that time is everything now," was the answer, and the mules were urged on a little faster.

Then on over the rough trail the wagons and the led horses thundered, each driver fully realizing that a dread danger threatened them, and gazing with expressions of admiration and gratitude upon the splendid form of Buffalo Bill as he now led the way with Captain Tom by his side.

Having seen the train doing its best Buffalo Bill had said:

"Will you ride on with me, sir, to look over the ground and place the wagons as they come up?"

"Certainly, and it is a good idea.

"You neglect nothing, I see, my friend," and Captain Starbuck urged his horse to a run to keep up with the pony rider.

Out of the trail wheeled Buffalo Bill when he came near the camping place, and riding up to it the two quickly dismounted.

"You see we have a natural stronghold here, sir, and the wagons can make the climb with an effort and assistance.

"Once here we have a small fort as it were; not much over an acre in size, and one we can easily defend, for you must have at least thirty men."

"Thirty-seven fighters, sir, then half a dozen boys from twelve to fifteen, and in all, ninety-one people."

"We can make a brave show then.

"See, the Indians are pressing on, but we will be ready for them."

Captain Starbuck took the field glass handed to him and said:

"They look to be in very large force."

"Two hundred at least, sir."

"I should have said far more.

"How far are they away?"

"All of five miles, sir."

"And the wagons are near, thank Heaven."

"Yes, sir; they will all be coralled here within two minutes, and in twenty the Indians will be upon us, while darkness will fall soon after.

"Let me tell you now, sir, that my idea is that the Indians will come with a rush, trying to stampede the cattle and demoralize the people at once; but if we meet them bravely we will check them, and then they will try strategy.

"Have your people ever been under fire?"

"Well, I can hardly say that we have, for we only had a slight brush with a small band of redskins, and before that some outlaws sought to rob us, but were foiled by a few shots."

"All right, they will not waver, I am sure; but the redskins have halted there from some cause, just what, I cannot say; but I think something has fallen

from one of the wagons, though why that should stop them I cannot see; but here are the wagons," and as the ambulance drove up Buffalo Bill called a halt and ordered the men to the front to aid each vehicle up the steep and rugged way to the hilltop.

They obeyed quickly, and first went the ambulance, then the loose horses were driven up, and next wagon after wagon until all had safely reached the top and were placed in position by Buffalo Bill.

As the last one came up the pony rider called out to the driver of it:

"Is not that the wagon that was ahead with the ambulance?"

"Yes, sir; it's Captain Tom's wagon."

"Is your prisoner all right?"

"My God, sir; he is gone.

"He has jolted out of the rear end," cried the men.

"He jolted himself out and took chances, bound as he was.

"It was he that the Indians halted for; but never mind him now, for there is work to be done, and the redskins are coming ahead once more," and Buffalo Bill turned to arranging the men for defense.

CHAPTER XIX.

READY FOR ACTION.

The train people were nervous, there was no denying that fact, but men and women saw how cool their pony rider commander was and tried to emulate his example.

Captain Tom was calm and self possessed also, while Ada Starbuck was as chipper as a bird and showed no fear.

All had read of the massacres by Indians, and since reaching the Far West had heard tales of redskin cruelties time and again, and it was no wonder that they dreaded the ordeal.

But Buffalo Bill got the men together to defend the rise leading to their position, called for all of the weapons, and told the women just where they were to remain with the children, while the horses and mules were coralled in a secure place beyond stampede.

The sun was just upon the horizon as Buffalo Bill said cheerily:

"Let them come, now, for we are ready for them."

There were two guns to a man, counting muskets and shotguns that were in addition to the rifles, and the men had over a hundred revolvers.

Ammunition was in plenty, and with the weapons all loaded and men occupying good positions, a feeling of confidence began to settle upon all, as Buffalo Bill passed along the line.

"Unfortunately that traitor guide of yours knows exactly our numbers, but we must fight the harder for that.

"Then, too, the Indians will be rather anxious to capture me, but I'll do all I can to thwart them, and altogether we can make a grand fight of it," said Buffalo Bill to Captain Tom.

Some of the women had tears in their eyes, but they kept from showing further weakness, and if a few of the children were crying in their fright that was to be expected.

Buffalo Bill stood upon a rock, calmly viewing the approaching cavalcade of savage horsemen.

To him it was an ordinary spectacle, but to Ada Starbuck a most extraordinary one, and as she looked at the rapidly moving ponies, the gayly decorated braves and the painted faces coming to fight and destroy, she was awed as well as impressed with the grandeur of the scene, and said earnestly:

"That is a grand, yet terrible, sight, Mr. Buffalo Bill."

"You are a brave little lady to admire what threatens you with death; but it is indeed a grand sight, and will be grander when they charge us and shots and yells fill the air, ponies and riders go down, and death holds high carnival," replied Buffalo Bill.

"I shall not perish, I am sure.

"See, our tenderfoot defenders, following your example, stand as brave as veterans at their post."

"Yes, and will fight like veterans, but you must not expose yourself, Miss Starbuck, for arrows and bullets respect not even beauty."

"Thanks for the compliment.

"But just think what all that grand display of painted, savage braves would have meant to us but for you, sir.

"Oh! How much we have to thank you for, and how quietly you subdued that man who loved to tell us of his hair-breadth escapes and that he knew no such word as fear.

"But I mistrusted him all the time, only the others, my father included, liked the man; but see, what are they halting for?"

"To form for the charge.

"You must go to shelter now," and turning to the men Buffalo Bill called out:

"Attention, all!

"Let no man fire until I give the word.

"Then lay aside your empty rifles and take the extra ones, firing again.

"Then use your revolvers if they still come on.

"Keep well under cover, do not throw your shots away, but fire deliberately and take good aim.

"The boys who reload your weapons must do it quickly and well.

"Are all ready?"

A chorus of voices answered in the affirmative and Buffalo Bill continued:

"If any man is killed, and we must expect it, pay no heed to it, for he will be beyond aid.

"If any man is wounded let him stick to his post, if able to do so, and if not, he can withdraw quietly.

"You can die but once, but there are those you love to defend, so let every man do his duty.

"Now they are ready.

"Keep cool and await the command to fire."

The cheer that answered the words of Buffalo Bill convinced him that he had brave men to fight under him, tenderfoot though they might be to the ways of the Wild West.

The Indians had now formed in three columns, of seven braves abreast, and each column Buffalo Bill quickly estimated at about seventy horsemen.

A chief was at the head of each column, and as they moved forward Buffalo Bill saw that a group of horses remained behind and there were several braves with them. But in their midst he recognized the face of Kit Kirby, the guide.

"Coward, I dare you to come on!" he shouted, in a voice that reached the traitor guide, for he was seen to raise his fist and shake it at the pony rider, but what he said could not be heard.

Once they moved forward the Indian horsemen went from a walk to a trot, then to a canter that ended in a wild charge, while from two hundred throats broke forth savage yells, and showers of arrows were sent flying upon the little camp of defenders.

It was an appalling scene, and it seemed that the mass of horses and warriors would surely break into the line of defenders and the end must soon come.

CHAPTER XX.

BATTLING FOR LIFE.

Every eye was upon Buffalo Bill as he stood upon a rock in full view, his tall form seeking no shelter, though he had so earnestly urged it upon all others.

The women and children from the rear beheld him standing there, a rifle by his side, and the men gazed upon him with admiration, while Captain Tom twice called out to him to seek shelter.

But still he stood, watching the advance of the savage horsemen.

Suddenly to his side glided a slender form.

It was Ada Starbuck.

"If you seem to think there is no danger here, I will remain with you," she said, in a tone of reproach at his seeming recklessness.

"My dear young lady, there will be the

greatest danger here when those red devils get nearer; but I know the ranges of their weapons, and intended leaving at the proper time—come, we will seek shelter now," and as Buffalo Bill spoke a number of arrows dropped about them.

As he gently thrust Ada Starbuck behind the shelter of a large rock, he threw his rifle to his shoulder, his eye ran along the barrel, his finger touched the trigger, and with the sharp report the gorgeously-attired chief leading the center column fell from his horse.

A cheer from the train men greeted this exhibition of deadly aim, but not a man fired a shot.

They waited for the word, as they had been commanded to do, and a smile of satisfaction passed over Buffalo Bill's face at their good discipline.

But the Indians were drawing dangerously near, and that the men were getting anxious there was no doubt.

A few more bounds of the ponies up the steep hill, and then came the command, heard above the demoniacal yells of the Indians, who were maddened at the fall of their chief.

"Fire!"

Nearly forty rifles flashed forth like a volley fired by disciplined soldiers, and down went ponies and riders, while the column, hit hard, staggered under the shock.

"Now, your extra guns—Fire!"

They were the muskets now, and the shot-guns, loaded heavily with slugs and buckshot, and the reports were deafening and scattering.

The blow was at still closer range than the rifle volley, and the shock was more staggering than the other.

But the red horsemen still pressed on from the rear over the dead and wounded braves and horses in their front, their blood-curdling yells sounding more appalling as they drew nearer.

"Now your revolvers, men!"

"Fire at will!"

"Boys, reload quickly and well the rifles!"

The first was shouted to the men, and, turning, Buffalo Bill had called out the last words to the boys engaged in reloading the emptied rifles.

"I'll command this squad!" cried the clear voice of Ada Starbuck, rising above the popping of the revolvers.

The men were now emptying their revolvers at close range, for the redskins had drawn dangerously near.

Loud rang the voice of Buffalo Bill, cheering them, as now, defying danger, he stood boldly exposed and fired his revolver with cool deliberation, while Captain Starbuck was doing all in his power to encourage the men.

"More rifles loaded!" shouted the clear voice of Ada Starbuck as she rushed forward with an armful of them, and was followed by several boys, also bearing weapons.

The men seized them, and as the rifles began to roar again, the Indian horsemen, some of them on foot and climbing the rocks, could no longer face the deadly storm of lead, and with yells of rage turned and fled.

Those still pressing on in the rear also were seized with the panic, and broke in confusion, a few of them rallying to bear off their wounded comrades.

"Keep up your fire, men!"

"Spare no one, for they know not mercy!" was heard in the voice of Buffalo Bill, while, as the now reloaded weapons began to rattle, the Indians, unable to longer stand the fire, stampeded down the slope like a herd of Texas steers, and quickly sought refuge beyond the range of the death-dealing rifles.

"Bravo, men! We have won!"

"Three cheers for our gallant commander!"

It was Captain Tom whose voice was now heard, and the men gave three cheers that were in hearty earnest for Buffalo Bill, who raised his hat quickly in response, and then said:

"Now to see to our dead and wounded and the reloading of all weapons and re-

placing them, ready for use, for these redskins have not given up the fight by any means."

These words cast a slight damper over the victors, for they had supposed the fight ended, but they felt that Buffalo Bill knew, and at once set to work to first get their guns ready, and then to care for their wounded.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

In the gathering twilight the men saw to the reloading of their weapons and standing them by their sides ready for instant use.

Then Buffalo Bill and Captain Tom, with four men who had improvised a stretcher of a blanket folded around two tent poles, tenderly bore the wounded back to a safe place, where Ada Starbuck and several of the women at once took them in charge, to care for them, under the direction of one of the men who had served for a couple of years in a hospital.

There were half a dozen wounded, two of the number seriously, and three men had been killed.

A boy had also been slightly wounded, and one of the women, who had not remained in the shelter, had an arrow lodged in her arm.

Several of the horses had also been hit with arrows, and a mule killed, so that the little camp had suffered severely in the fight, though they were by no means disheartened, and were full of pluck for another brush with their foes, if necessary.

One and all were loud in their praise of Buffalo Bill, and freely admitted that they owed everything to him.

He had, in the mean time, thoroughly reconnoitered the position, and had placed sentinels where he felt they would be needed.

"I will do duty out in front, Captain Starbuck, and you must keep going the rounds of the sentinels, for though I expect no attack before dawn, and do not believe the redskins can attack from the river, you must keep up a night watch and let no man go to sleep on his post."

"I will see to it, sir, that they keep good watch; but do you think they will wait until dawn before attacking?"

"Yes, sir; for redskins seldom fight at night, and unless urged to do so by that renegade guide, they will not do so; but it is to be prepared for them that I will scout outside."

"You will take desperate chances in doing so."

"No, sir, for I am accustomed to this kind of work, and I hope, with that long-range rifle you loaned me, to get a chance to pick off your guide, Kit Kirby, and see how many more lives the fellow has."

"Don't venture too much, I beg of you."

"But did not the redskins suffer heavily under our fire?"

"Yes, sir; for the men fought with coolness and good judgment, and deserve the greatest credit."

"They did great execution, and the Indians lost at least a third of their ponies and a fourth of their braves, killed and wounded, I feel certain."

"Then our loss is light in comparison; but come, for Ada is calling us to supper," and Thomas Starbuck led the way to where his own little camp was, and there an old family servant of his, who had been his daughter's nurse, and had refused to leave her, had prepared a good supper for them.

Buffalo Bill ate heartily, and with the air of a man to whom such scenes as the one they had just passed through was an everyday occurrence to him.

Supper over, he made the rounds of the sentinels with Captain Tom, and then, with the long-range, borrowed rifle in hand, he started down the hill.

He soon came to the dead braves and ponies that had reached nearest to the line, and from there on made his way most cautiously.

In the darkness he could see nothing at a further distance than a few feet, for the sky was overcast with clouds.

He saw horses writhing in agony with their wounds, but no wounded braves lay upon the hillside, for they had either been carried off by their comrades or had crawled away themselves, but dead warriors there were quite a number of.

Buffalo Bill had reached the base of the hill and then he halted.

He had good reason for doing so, as he heard a sound that startled him.

"That renegade has prevailed upon them to make a night charge, and they are creeping up on foot," said Buffalo Bill, and quickly he began to retrace his way, for, dark as it was, he had seen what appeared to be a black mass rolling slowly toward the rise.

In a couple of minutes he was within the camp, the men were aroused for action, and the word was passed along:

"Aim your guns at a dark shadow you will soon see slowly moving up the hill, and fire at the word of command!"

The men were nerved by their victory of two hours before to do their best, and they were also aware that a night attack might be harder to repel than one by day.

They had not long to wait before they could see the coming "shadow," and a moment later came the loud command of their trusted leader:

"Fire!"

The sheet of flame that shot out from the hilltop told the cunning braves that their foes were not to be caught napping, as they had supposed, and sent forth a perfect hurricane of leaden hail that tore with dull thuds into many a heart and brain, while the glare of the red flashes lighted up the scene, revealing the crouching savages all ready for their fatal rush upon their pale face foes.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PLAN FOR RESCUE.

It was a crushing blow to the Indians, this sudden storm of bullets into their midst.

Where they had expected to surprise and kill they had met defeat, and added more comrades to those that lay stark and stiff upon the hillside.

Cunning as they were, there was some one in the camp who could overmatch them.

Down the hill they retreated with a greater panic than before, and when darkness reigned once more, the wounded braves began to drag themselves off the field.

There was no groan of anguish from these red warriors, schooled to suffer pain without a murmur.

All in the camp knew that again they owed their lives to Buffalo Bill.

What if he had not gone out upon that scouting tramp?

The result was too fearful to contemplate, and men and children pressed around him and expressed their gratitude in earnest words.

Calling Captain Tom and several of the men aside, Buffalo Bill said:

"We have driven these redskins off twice, but they have by no means given up the fight."

"It is not their nature to do so."

"They will not make another attack before dawn, but I expect that they will do so then."

"As they cannot cross the river, they will again attack at the open end of our horseshoe camp."

"Now you have all shown yourselves as steady as veterans under fire, and you will not need me for the next attack, which cannot be as strong in numbers, as they have lost one-third their force."

All looked anxiously at Buffalo Bill as the camp fire light fell full upon him.

What did his words portend?

Was he going to leave them, after having saved them?

After a pause Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now, these redskins are dangerously near their village, and after their second defeat just now, I am sure they have sent couriers up into the mountain range you were making for when I overtook you to bring many more warriors to their aid."

"They are well aware that they are out

of hearing of any pony rider passing along the trail, half a dozen miles from here, and that the riders dash by like the wind; and more, they do not expect aid to come to you, knowing from this guide that no one knows of your being here, save myself, and that I am here with you.

"So if they fail in the daylight attack they will settle down to capture you by strategy, keeping you constantly on the alert, tiring you out, picking off your sentinels, firing on you from across the river, for they will dig holes to lie in and shoot you from.

"In fact, there is no end to an Indian's cleverness and means of capturing a foe.

"Now, I am but one man, and you would miss me only as such in the next fight, while I can do you more good away from you than here.

"I will be missed when I fail to go in on time, at the ranch, but it may be hours before they start out a search party for me.

"If so, they will reach the spot where you crossed the pony trail after nightfall, and so will not see it, and you will then have a long day and another night of siege.

"If the patrol find I have not passed the stations, they will have to wait until day, so it will be perhaps late the second day before they reach here, and in such small force they can do no good, as the Indians will have reinforcements long before.

"Having explained the situation fully, and that when aid comes, as the Indians will have reinforcements before then, it may be too late, I will now tell you my plan."

"We rely wholly upon you, Mr. Cody, for you are our Moses, to guide us out of the wilderness," said Captain Starbuck, with a sad smile.

"My plan is to leave you and go with all speed on foot to the nearest relay station, and send for the Pony Riders' Patrol, of which I am the captain when on the trail."

"But you cannot possibly leave, Mr. Cody, with all those Indians in our front," said Captain Tom.

"No; they have it well guarded; but I think I may get through by disguising myself."

"Disguising yourself?"

"Yes; playing Indian."

"I do not exactly grasp your meaning."

"When I went out before I saw a number of dead Indians, and I can go now, get some of their traps, rub paint enough off their faces to smear mine, which, with a little charcoal black, will make me look Indian enough to fool them in the night.

"Then a headdress and blanket will do the rest, and if I am not inspected at close range I will go through all right, and perhaps can cut out a horse from their herd, so I will not have to walk."

"Ah, Mr. Cody, I cannot think of allowing you to take such a risk," said Captain Tom, while the others said:

"No, no; it will never do to take such a risk."

"Gentlemen, let me tell you frankly that it will be a greater risk to remain here unless aid comes to you quickly," was Buffalo Bill's significant reply.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A VERY DARING VENTURE.

The impressive and significant manner in which Buffalo Bill replied to them convinced the trainmen of the desperation of their situation.

Having shown that he might pass through the lines easily in disguise, without going very near to any Indian, Buffalo Bill convinced the men that it was the only thing for him to do.

They did not wish to give him up, nor did they care to see him risk himself in such a way, while they felt that they needed his help and example; but there was nothing for it but that he should go, and he was quickly ready for the start.

He carried with him his revolvers only, and going over the barrier of rocks as quietly as he could, with a whispered farewell to Captain Tom and the others,

who knew of his venture, he soon disappeared from the view of those who were watching him.

Finding the bodies of the dead Indians, with his handkerchief, which he had first saturated in water, he began to rub the paint off of their faces and transfer it to his own.

This he kept up, going from Indian to Indian, until he felt that he had made his face hideous enough to pass muster.

Then he pulled his long hair on each side of his face, put on an Indian headdress, and folded about him a blanket that he took from the body of the chief he had killed.

He was tempted to wear his gorgeous war bonnet also; but he knew it would quickly catch the eye, and what he desired most was to avoid attracting attention.

When fully costumed he went on more boldly to the base of the hill.

But he halted suddenly, for instead of finding an Indian guard there, his keen eyes detected that the whole band was camped straight across the neck of land.

To attempt to pass through such a line would be worse than madness, and Buffalo Bill lay there pondering as he took in the long line of sleeping redskins that barred his way.

"There are more ways than one of out-Injun'ing an Injun," he muttered at last, and he began to creep back up the hill.

When he suddenly appeared before Captain Tom and the group he had left not an hour before, his appearance gave them a shock which caused one of the men to remark:

"It's sure none of us have heart disease, or that sudden fright would have killed us, Mr. Cody."

"I am glad I look so much like an Indian."

"Yet it was all of no use, for they are camped clear across the neck, and I came back to try another plan."

"But what other plan can you try?" anxiously asked Captain Tom, for dawn was now not very far off.

"I will go by water."

"By water?"

"Yes. I will slip down to the brook and go that way."

"You must be a daring swimmer, to venture into that wild stream, Mr. Cody."

"I swim well, sir; but the drawback is that on the other shore, from here down, you noticed that the cliff banks begin."

"Yes."

"The stream turns this hill and then runs toward the Indian Mountains, and with its cliff banks I can find no landing for a mile, as I know, for once I rode down on this shore for miles.

"When I can land, I am on the other side of a rugged range, which will give me a dozen more miles to walk than if I could have slipped through the redskin lines, turned up the stream, crossed at the ford, and gone right along on the trail your guide led you by.

"But there is no other way for me to do, and now I only regret not having gone that way in the first place, before I spoiled my beauty," and Buffalo Bill laughed.

"The water is very cold now, Mr. Cody, and you will be chilled through."

"Yes, with the melting snows in the mountains, it will be chilly, but I'll soon warm up in running."

"Now I wish to find a boat for my revolvers."

"A boat?"

"Yes, a log, or sticks to make a little raft to carry them on, for I wish to keep them dry."

A little raft was soon made, the revolvers were wrapped in a blanket and put upon it, and a line was fastened to it, which Buffalo Bill was to tie about him when he got into the water.

A good place was then found for him to get down into the stream, and placing his shoes, outer leggings, socks, hunting jacket and hat also on the raft, he went down into the icy waters.

Fastening the line about his waist, he launched the raft and then struck quietly out from the shore.

In an instant he was in the swift-rush-

ing current, and was whirled out of the sight of those watching him as he was borne rapidly down the raging stream on his daring venture to save the lives of others.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"NEVER MIND THE ODDS."

"Boys, look there!"

It was Little Lone Star who uttered the words, and he sat upon his horse in the pony trail, pointing down at the ground.

Lone Star had been a ranger and scout in Texas, and there was very little that his sharp and experienced eye missed seeing.

What others would have passed over he would have seen at a glance.

It was soon after Pony Bob had turned back on the trail, and Lone Star and his eight followers were riding along in Indian file, all feeling blue over the mysterious disappearance of Buffalo Bill.

They had ridden into the somber little valley in which stood Monument Rock, when Lone Star had suddenly halted and given expression to the words that open this chapter.

All the riders spurred quickly to his side and every eye was fixed upon what he was looking at in surprise.

"A trail!"

"A wagon trail!"

"A big one, too!"

"An army force, I guess!"

"No, it's not artillery."

"And going toward Indian land."

"Going to the devil!" broke in Lone Star, vehemently.

"It's a wagon trail and made by settlers, of course, looking for a place to settle, and who will find a place to remain until Judgment Day.

"There are a dozen wagons at least, half a hundred or more driven horses, and they are lost and going to their graves.

"Boys, I believe Buffalo Bill saw this trail and followed it, for he's not the man to let men, women and children go to death if he can prevent, no matter what the Overland Company may suffer.

"But why has he not come back before this?"

This last question of Lone Star no one could answer.

"I guess you are right, pard, and Buffalo Bill followed this trail to turn them back," said Happy Harper.

"But where is he?" asked one.

"Where are they?" another questioned.

"It looks bad."

"Pards, we'll take this trail, but first I want to send for help, so one of you go westward, as far as Valley Farm, collecting one or two men at every station—no, don't go as far as Valley Farm, but to the relay this side, as it would leave Little Sunbeam alone if you took Gentleman George, and you can get half a dozen stock-tenders without him.

"Send them right here with all speed, and you, Happy Harper, ride as though Satan was after you, finding the men here from each station, and tell Captain Starbuck the situation.

"I hope Devil Dan and his party will have returned by the time you reach the ranch, and a big force of men can be sent, for I'll bet the Lone Star of Texas against an Indian's scalp, that outfit that left this trail is corralled by redskins somewhere and with a big chance of making graveyards of the whole party.

"Now, pards, be off, and just say that you think Buffalo Bill is in with the outfit and that will make them push the faster.

"I'll ride on with the rest here, and when I find what the trouble is, send a man back here to meet you all.

"Go!"

Away darted the two men, one eastward, the other westward, and they soon disappeared from sight, while Lone Star and the others rode on, following the wagon trail up Monument Rock Valley.

"We are only seven, pard Lone Star, a very small force to go to the rescue against a large number of Indians," said one of the men more cautious than the others.

"Pard Dick, never count the odds when women and children cry for help," was the retort of Lone Star, and he continued:

"My idea is that Buffalo Bill is at the end of this trail, and I'll bet every dollar I ever expect to win at poker that he never counted the odds against him in trying to save those who he knew were going this way to sure death.

"I did fear Bill might have gone under, but to my mind this trail explains where he is.

"If I am wrong, we can at least save others.

"If we are but seven, those two boys will be sending help here from each station, and by night we should have near fifty men following on our trail, pony riders and stablemen, and maybe a few settlers and miners may also come along, and I would then like to see the half a thousand redskins our ranch rangers can't whip out in a good cause.

"Come, pards, we'll strike a livelier gait than this, for I've seen times when minutes were worth days at other times."

The pace was quickened, the men riding along in a swinging gallop.

When they got out of the somber valley and came to where there was some mud from the overflow of a swamp, Lone Star suddenly drew rein and cried:

"Look at that, pards!

"Tracks!"

"Yes, the tracks of Buffalo Bill's horse, or I never sinned in my life, for I have been taking stock of these hoof marks all along.

"Buffalo Bill's horse made that trail."

"Right you are, pard Lone Star," cried a voice from a thicket near by, and with one accord the pony riders shouted:

"Buffalo Bill!"

CHAPTER XXV.

"PARDS, YOU ARE NEEDED."

The men cried out with delight at first recognizing their comrade, and then they all looked in wonder, and ended with a burst of laughter.

And no wonder, for there stood Buffalo Bill, the handsome, dashing, well-dressed pony rider, the "Dandy of the Trail," metamorphosed into a most comical looking being.

His hat was gone and his hair was wet and matted.

He was in his shirt sleeves, and his belt was devoid of any weapons.

His shirt and leggings were wet and clung close to his form, while his feet were bare of shoes or socks.

But worst of all was his face, which was daubed all the hues of the rainbow, giving him a most ludicrous expression, like a clown that had been caught in a shower of rain.

Buffalo Bill joined in the laughter at his expense, and said dryly:

"I guess I am an ugly picture, pards.

"I'd like to have a photograph of myself."

But the laughter suddenly ceased when Lone Star called out:

"Pards, look at those feet."

They were cut, bruised and bleeding, and a closer look showed that the hands were bloodstained too, while the face, in spite of its being streaked with paint, was haggard and white.

"Why, Bill, you have had a hard time of it and are suffering."

"At first we saw only the ludicrous side of your appearance," said Lone Star.

"That is all right, Lone Star, but I have had a rough time of it, for I escaped from danger by swimming Whirlpool Creek, and lost my little raft in the rough waters, with my hat, coat, shoes and weapons.

"As I am on a mission of life and death I did not mind cuts and bruises in going barefoot, or in making my way through thickets.

"Pards, you are needed, and needed bad.

"Have you a horse that I can ride?"

"Take mine, for I am light and will mount the pack animal," and Lone Star sprang from his horse.

Others quickly offered their horses, but Lone Star insisted that he was twenty pounds lighter than any of them and Buffalo Bill could lengthen his stirrups, while his horse was the best in the outfit.

"All right, Lone Star, I'll go you, and we will lose no time, for as I said, you are wanted and wanted bad.

"Come along with me, and I'll talk as I ride, but are there no more coming?"

"Yes, for I sent men each way when I saw the wagon tracks crossing the pony trail, to send all the men from the relays here, and to tell Captain Starbuck we needed any fighting men at the ranch.

"I thought that it would be better to give the men a hard ride, even if they were not needed, than not to call on them if they were."

"Right you are, Lone Star, as you generally are.

"Now, where are the men to come?"

"To the Monument Rock."

"Good, and the first men told must be already on their way there. So, Happy Harper, you go back and remain there—ride the pack animal, and I'll take your horse—and when the men come up in force enough to make a show, push right on along this trail.

"If Wild Bill is along tell him it is Horseshoe Hill, for he knows it, and he will find a wagon train besieged there.

"It is half a mile below where this trail crosses the ford of Whirlpool Creek, and down stream.

"We will cut our way in if we can, and if not go into siege near by to await your coming, provided we cannot scare the redskins off; but it may take all our force from the ranch to do that if they have been reinforced.

"Tell the boys there are about thirty fighting men in the train.

"Now, as moments are precious, we will start, and it will feel mighty good for me to ride after the fifteen mile tramp I have had barefooted and without guns or food."

Happy Harper leaped upon the pack animal and was off in an instant, and Buffalo Bill, mounting his horse, set the pace in the other direction, and a good pace it was.

The horses were kept at a run for miles, and then Buffalo Bill drew rein upon a ridge.

"Pardners, the hill is not half a mile away, and you hear those shots that tell us the train people still hold out, and are popping away at an Indian when they get the chance.

"Now, there are redskins on this side of the stream, I am sure, but by this trail we can reach the ford before they can see us.

"In fact, as they are not expecting us, not knowing that I escaped last night, we can ride along the stream where it is shallow, until we get within a couple of hundred yards of the hill, and then make a dash for it.

"The Indians are not very close, on account of the long-range rifles of the train people, but when they see us they will attempt to head us off, but it will be too late, for the defenders will drive them back.

"Now, you are six, and I make seven, and knowing that aid is coming you bet we will be a big help to the poor people in their fight."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PONY RIDERS' CHARGE.

The pony riders to a man were willing to do just as Buffalo Bill said.

They would have followed him to certain death, and Lone Star said:

"You are the doctor, pard Bill, and know just what the patients need to drive off the attack of the red devils they are suffering with.

"Just set the tune, and we'll join in with you."

"I know that well.

"Now we have given our horses a breathing spell, we will further rest them by going slow to the ford.

"Are you ready, boys?"

"All ready," was the answer.

Buffalo Bill had borrowed one of Happy Harper's revolvers, and Lone Star had an extra one along, and gave him that, so he felt himself again with the two weapons stuck in his belt.

"I'm all right now, if I don't look it," he said, with a smile, and he rode ahead once more with Lone Star by his side.

They followed the wagon trail down from the ridge, across some meadow land fringed with willows, and were thus concealed from the view of those they sought to rescue, and the Indians, too.

They reached the ford, and in crossing the swift stream, which rose to their saddle girths, they gave their horses a few swallows of water.

There was a bend in the stream at the ford which still kept them concealed, and crossing, they turned downstream, sheltered by the further bank from view.

The little band soon came to a spot where they must leave the water, and all knew that as soon as they ascended the bank the redskins would discover them.

Taking in the situation, Buffalo Bill said:

"Pards, the hill lies about three hundred yards below us, perhaps a little more.

"We will ride up the bank here, and make for the hill.

"The Indians are encamped about a quarter of a mile from the hill, in some timber, but they will have to hustle pretty lively to head us off, though they will pump arrows and lead at us pretty lively.

"There are Indians across the river on the ridge we just left, as you can hear their rifles firing at the train people, and they may pepper us, too.

"Are you ready?"

"All ready," came the firm reply from the other six men.

The men then looked to their saddle-girths and their weapons, and, remounting, settled themselves well in their saddles.

The rest had greatly benefited the horses, and they could make the short run at full speed.

"When we dash into view, pards, we will give our pony riders' war cry, and the Indians will at first think we have a much larger force, and that will be in our favor.

"Come!"

Up the steep bank rode Buffalo Bill, and behind him came Lone Star, and then the others.

The order was single file at first, to present less space to the firing of the Indians.

The gallant leader had gotten a hundred feet into view before they were discovered, and then came the thrilling war cry of the pony riders, and the Indians knew it well.

There was a wild stampede for their ponies at first, as it was not believed possible that so small a force had dared come to the rescue.

The redskins across the river, too, were startled, fearing that they had been surrounded, and for a moment it seemed as though the little band of heroes were going to put twenty times their number to flight.

But the redskins soon saw the end of the line, and that no more horsemen appeared over the bank.

Though it was hard to believe, it was true, and they gave vent to wild cries, orders and yells, and at once set to work to try and head them off before they reached the hill.

Could they do this the pony riders were doomed.

On foot and horseback, just as they could do so, over a hundred warriors surged toward the hill, and the pony riders knew that the test for life or death was coming—that it was before them.

"Men, it is make the hill, or die!

"Crowd close, and come on!" came in the firm, clear voice of Buffalo Bill.

The pony riders answered with a yell, obeyed the order, dropped their reins upon the horns of their saddles, drew a revolver and followed their daring leader.

The cries of the savages had told the train people that something was wrong

with them, and they heard the war cry of the pony riders, and then beheld the devoted little band of heroes.

"It is Buffalo Bill coming to our rescue, but, my God! he and his little band will be utterly wiped out!" cried Captain Tom Starbuck to the train people, as all now beheld the daring pony riders in their magnificent charge.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PONY RIDERS AT BAY.

To the joy of all those of the train, men and women, who looked on the desperate dash of the pony riders, they came nearer the goal.

They had their faces bent on the hill they were risking so much to meet, but their eyes were upon foes, rushing with full speed to head them off, reckless of their own lives if they could only overwhelm that little band.

But the little band pushed on, and as it seemed they must meet their red enemies in a hand-to-hand struggle, the train people heard the loud command of Buffalo Bill:

"Halt, and give them your rifles!

"Fire!"

There was a sudden halt, six rifles flashed, and each shot told.

If the pony riders had lost a moment to fire, the Indians were staggered by the deadly discharge, and a wild yell went up as they beheld half a dozen of their comrades fall from their ponies, for the mounted warriors had been the ones aimed at, as they were the most dangerous.

"We must support them and cover their retreat," cried Captain Tom, and he started with a dozen men down the hill.

The pony riders saw his act, and warned him back, Buffalo Bill shouting:

"Go back!

"We'll get there!"

The pony riders were thankful, however, for the volley the train people poured upon their foes, again staggering them, and gave Captain Tom and his men a cheer.

"They are using revolvers now," cried the leader of the train people, as Buffalo Bill's command was heard:

"Give them your revolvers now, men!"

The rapid rattle of the revolvers made merry music, and the shots were not thrown away.

The pony riders were at bay, but calm and dangerous.

Again the Indian mounted column wavered under the fire, but the dismounted braves were hastening on, and, half halting, fired.

A horse went down, and it was Little Lone Star's.

But, agile as a cat, he caught on his feet, and, with a leap was up behind the nearest comrade to him in a second.

Then came a shower of arrows, with a few bullets, and one of the riders, Nat Clay, reeled, clutched at the air, and fell from his saddle.

But, hardly had he struck the ground, before Buffalo Bill had halted, thrown him across his horse, and was again in the saddle, just as another horse went down.

But the rider did not fall, but caught also on his feet, and grasping the tail of the riderless horse as he passed him, kept up with the procession.

The revolvers were empty now, but Captain Tom and his men sent in another staggering volley, and the next instant the hill was reached, amid wild cheers of triumph, mingled with the maddened yells of the redskins.

"Wheel and beat them back!

"Load the rifles, boys!" shouted Buffalo Bill, and, dismounted now, the six pony riders turned about, and, seizing weapons handed them by the boys and several women, they opened fire upon the Indians, who, mounted and on foot, were trying to break in during the confusion.

But the extra rifles and guns sent a storm of bullets into their midst that even Indian courage could not face, and as the boys, urged on by Ada Starbuck, kept supplying all with freshly loaded weapons, the victory was won, and the foes ran for shelter with all speed, leaving a number of dead upon the field.

Then Captain Tom turned to Buffalo Bill, and, grasping his hand, cried:

"You are back again, and with what aid you could get; but why did you take such desperate chances?"

"For two reasons, one being that I hoped our coming would stampede the Indians, who would naturally expect a large force.

"In the second place, if they did not stampede, you would have the benefit of our aid, for my comrades are old and skilled Indian fighters, and could help greatly until reinforcements came, for others are coming, and before long."

"Mr. Cody, how can we all thank you and your friends?" said Ada Starbuck, coming up and grasping his hand, and she added:

"Your appearance shows what you went through to serve us, and I see that you are wounded in the head, and I will at once see what I can do for you."

"Others need aid much more than I do, Miss Ada.

"But let me present my pards to you, and sorry I am that poor Nat Clay went under, and Buffalo Bill introduced his comrades to the pretty girl, all of whom felt rewarded by the warm grasp of her hand, her gratitude earnestly expressed and the sweet look she gave them for all they had risked and suffered.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WATCHING AND WAITING.

Buffalo Bill soon found himself nicely cared for, as one of Captain Tom's hats just fitted him, and socks and boots were found for him, while his cut and bruised feet and legs were dressed by the "doctor," and he said he was as good as ever, save for the soreness he felt after his hard tramp over rocks and through thickets.

The pony riders were given a good dinner by Ada Starbuck, and then all hands turned out to bury the dead, a pretty spot having been chosen on the river bank.

Captain Tom read the burial service in an impressive manner, and the bodies of the dead men wrapped in blankets and consigned to the graves, Ada starting a burial hymn in which all joined her.

The Indians had returned to their former positions, and were venting their fury by occasional shots and with wild yells of hatred.

Captain Tom told Buffalo Bill that a demonstration had been made at dawn, but finding the train people ready for them, the Indians had not made a direct charge.

The shadows were lengthening when Buffalo Bill, who had been searching the expanse of country toward the hills, called to Captain Tom to approach.

"Take my glass, and you will see that reinforcements are coming to them."

"You are right."

"The courier we saw ride rapidly away after our arrival was sent to hasten them on, sir."

"How many do you think are coming?"

"As well as I can judge at this distance I should say all of a hundred, if not more."

"Lone Star!"

"Ay, ay," and Lone Star joined them.

"Take my glass, and see if you can make out anything over toward the mountains."

"You bet I do!"

"What?"

"Indians."

"How many?"

"I call them a hundred or more."

"They will be here in an hour's time."

"Yes, for they are pushing right along."

"It will be night, then."

"About."

"And what about our pards?"

"They'll not be far away when wanted."

"So I say, though they may not show up until needed."

"Happy Harper will explain all to them."

"Let me see, we ought to have at least forty by dark, and more coming."

"All of that, Bill."

"And forty of our men, Captain Starbuck, are a match for ten times their number, and the Indians know it."

"I hope Wild Bill will be in command, pard."

"Yes, Lone Star, for he knows this hill well, for he and I camped here once, and he is acquainted with its approaches, while he also understands handling the men in a fight.

"Yes, I hope he will be along."

"Now, Captain Tom, how many men have you for a fight?"

"Twenty-seven of us, including myself."

"And we are five, as we lost poor Nat Clay, and Boone is too badly wounded to be of any service—thirty-two all told."

"Captain Tom, we have nothing to fear from those Indians and their reinforcements, and, if I am not mistaken, before another sun rises, they will have cause to remember Horseshoe Hill."

"I hope so."

"Cheer your people up, sir, and have horses saddled for thirty men, for two men and the boys can guard the camp, and when our patrol of pony riders come up we can ride out and join in the attack."

"You speak as though sure of your men, Mr. Cody."

"They have never failed a comrade in time of need, sir, and never will."

"Did Captain Nat Starbuck know you needed help he would come himself, though the company's orders are that he shall not risk danger, having such responsibility on his hands, and I was elected captain of the Pony Riders' Patrol, while Wild Bill is first lieutenant, and Lone Star here second lieutenant, Pony Bob being orderly sergeant, for we have a thorough military organization of the riders, and in time of great need the stablemen form another company, the stock-tenders a third, and the settlers and miners a fourth, giving us a hundred and forty men to take the field, and the Indians know what we can do, as we once carried the war into their camps.

"See, that reinforcing band is coming on rapidly, and those in our front see them, too, for, hark! how they yell."

"They feel sure of us now," said Lone Star, with a smile, and he added:

"But I guess you'll get back to Headquarters Ranch to go out on time at noon to-morrow."

"Yes, if we beat those redskins off easily I will go on to Valley Farm to-night and get the east-bound freight, returning on time to start out again."

"You are surely not going to put such an extra tax upon yourself, Mr. Cody, after all you have gone through with?"

"Yes, Captain Tom, duty demands that the pouches go through, and if I did not go some one else would have to, and the boys are all tired as well as I."

"But you cannot stand such a strain."

"Wait until you have been out here a while, sir, and discovered just what the pony riders can stand," answered Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

Just then there came a crashing volley of rifles from across the stream that startled Indians and pale-faces alike.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PONY RIDERS TO THE RESCUE.

Every eye, redskin and pale-face, turned at the rattling discharge of rifles from the cliffs across the stream.

Back beyond the sandy bottom several hundred yards were the heavily wooded cliffs, and from the foliage had burst forth flame and smoke from two dozen rifles.

They were aimed down upon the Indians crouching behind rocks, scrub willows, and in holes they had dug at night, and who had been constantly dropping shot into the wagon train camp, killing a child, a woman, a boy, wounding several others, and now and then dropping a horse.

Good shots with the rifle were posted on the hill, hidden by rocks and watching them, or the death rate would have been far more.

There were all of two score of these sharpshooting braves, who had crossed the river by night at the ford and taken up their positions.

Then the main force was encamped on the neck of land facing the hill, and of

this force there was over a hundred, with as many more a few miles away, coming to their aid.

Though the people of the wagon train had suffered, the dead redskins and ponies lying on the neck of land and hill slope told how very much more the Indians had been the losers.

It was upon the sharpshooters on the flat across the stream that the rifles on the cliffs had been aimed.

From the rear the Indians had no shelter, and many a brave never rose from his position.

Others, in dire alarm, sprang up and rushed for the ford, leaving their ponies staked out back under the cliff.

But as they reached the willows other shots were heard, and Buffalo Bill cried:

"Wild Bill is on hand!"

"I know his way of working, and he is well backed.

"Come, men, to your saddles, for we are wanted, too!"

The Indians facing the Horseshoe Hill seemed surprised at the turn of affairs.

The shots from the cliffs across the stream told them that they had foes there, that reinforcements had come also for the pale-faces, arriving before their own.

They had guessed at about the number; from the shots, and were glad to feel that they were not strong enough to venture across the ford and attack them.

But they were maddened at the loss that volley had brought upon their comrades.

But the shots in the willows by the ford, to which the braves across the stream had run, showed that there were more pale-faces coming.

But how many more?

The chiefs hastily consulted, looked longingly for their own reinforcements, yet three miles away, and began to form for battle to try and hold their position until help came also for them.

But just then they saw thirty horsemen, led by Buffalo Bill, and with his pony riders close at his back, coming out of the wagon train camp to attack them.

They felt that they were in a tight place, but formed to fight and stand their ground until help came.

But ere a shot was fired there was heard the well-known war cry of the Pony Riders' Patrol, and coming over the bank from the ford was a band of horsemen.

At their head rode Wild Bill, and following in close order were thirty pony riders.

They saw the Indians, too, and were riding directly toward them.

"Halt! Aim well with your rifles—"

"Fire!" cried Buffalo Bill, and his band sent death into the Indian ranks, while Wild Bill followed the same tactics, and also poured a deadly rifle volley upon their red enemy.

"Charge them now, and use revolvers!" Buffalo Bill had commanded, and away his band rushed.

"Charge with revolvers!" echoed Wild Bill, and the war cries of the two bands mingled together.

Glancing pleadingly toward their yet distant comrades, yet longing for revenge, scalps and booty, hoping yet to win the day, could they hold out until their reinforcements came, the brave band of warriors still stood their ground and poured in a return fire with rifles and bows and arrows upon the two bodies of horsemen rushing with full speed upon them, as they stood at bay in the timber.

But as their fire did not do the execution hoped for, and the charging pale-faces came on, and their revolvers began to rattle, they cast a despairing glance toward the longed-for reinforcements and then broke in wild flight.

Yet as they ran, it was but a temporary act, for they hoped to rally upon their coming comrades, now seen to be fully two hundred in number.

Their numbers gave the flying redskins hope, and they wheeled behind them as they met them, and all together presented a bold front to the two bands of pale-face horsemen who had now united their forces, but yet moved on to the attack, as though defying the odds against them.

CHAPTER XXX.

A CONFLICT OF AUTHORITY.

"About five to one," said Buffalo Bill, who took command of the two forces of pale-faces, as Wild Bill came up and joined the train people with his band of pony riders.

"Yes, more, Buffalo, we are about five to one, but there are just sixty more fine fellows coming, for the Stable Boys' Guard and the Settlers' Rangers are now about up to the ford, so form your plans, knowing what backing you have," answered Wild Bill.

"Good, the ranch has turned out in force, then, and we can give those redskins a lesson to remember.

"It is getting dark now, so I will advance in line, firing with rifles as we do so.

"You command the right; Captain Tom, you take the left, and I will lead the center.

"Forward, march!"

The men formed rapidly and well, and advanced at the word.

The temporary halt, as the bands met, gave them a rest and a chance to realize their force, and knowing that they had reinforcements coming, which the redskins did not suspect, the men felt confidence in spite of the odds against them.

As they advanced in the gathering twilight they saw that the Indians had formed just on a rise, and with timber behind them.

There was a mole there several hundred yards in width, up which the pale-faces would have to advance, and this gave their foes a very advantageous position.

With the coming aid in their rear, Buffalo Bill, when he took in the situation of strength the Indians had, acted with the wisdom of a born commander, for he halted his little force in the mole, and ordered Wild Bill to take twelve men and go to the right to flank the position, while Lone Star with twelve more men went flanking on the left.

This left him to hold the center with a trifle over thirty men, and they at once began to advance very slowly, firing as they did so.

A courier had also been despatched to the rear to hurry up the reinforcements, the gathering darkness concealing his going, as it did also the movements of the flanking parties.

The redskins returned the fire with rifles and their bows and arrows, but their weapons were not of the range of their pale-face foes, and only about every other one of the redskins was armed with firearms.

Presently a messenger came up and informed Buffalo Bill that the Stable Boys' Guard and Settlers' Rangers were close at hand, sixty-five in number, while a band of stock-tenders, twenty in all, under command of Gentleman George, had sent on word they were then at the ford.

The new-comers were under the command of Burke Bradshaw, who also had two of the four six-pounder cannon at the ranch along.

Feeling that he had now about a hundred and fifty men with him, Buffalo Bill at once determined to send one gun on each flank, to support Wild Bill and Lone Star, and a dozen men with each one, so the flanking parties would be in good force, and await until they got into position and opened fire with the six-pounders, when he would charge the Indians up the mole with his entire force then there, leaving the stock-tenders to come up as a reserve.

He had just arranged his plans when Burke Bradshaw dashed up and cried:

"Here I am, and what force is here, for I must know just what men I have to handle."

"Pardon me, Mr. Bradshaw, but I have my Pony Riders' Patrol under me and the men of the wagon train, and I have arranged my plan of action," said Buffalo Bill.

"Your plan of action?"

"Yes, sir."

"But I command this force."

"By what authority?"

"Captain Starbuck sent me here with this force."

"Very well. I yield my authority, sir, and report for orders."

A perfect yell greeted this announcement of Buffalo Bill, with cries of:

"No! No! No!"

"You are to command!"

"We will not move save under your command, Buffalo Bill!"

Buffalo Bill was silent and Bradshaw said:

"Silence! I command here!"

"Buffalo Bill, you have no right to incite the men against my authority."

"See here, Burke Bradshaw," and Buffalo Bill wheeled hotly toward the man he addressed.

"I yielded my authority without a word, and you shall not accuse me of a charge of which I am innocent.

"Take command, sir, and as this is no time for quarreling among ourselves, I will do all I can to aid you."

"No! No! No!"

"We will not move an inch!"

"He never saw an Indian outside of a circus!"

"He is a clerk!"

And numerous were the cries raised by the men

"Silence, men!"

"If you cause trouble now we may be run over by the redskins, and let me tell you that two small bands of your comrades are now flanking them, and without your aid will be wiped out, while back yonder on Horseshoe Hill many women and children depend upon you to defend them.

"Obey Mr. Bradshaw, men!"

But these words of Buffalo Bill met with a flat refusal from the men, one and all.

The stable men refused to budge, the settlers and miners said they would not serve under a man who did not know an Indian from a cigar sign, and the train people flatly decided that they would return to their camp and defend it as best they could, Captain Tom remarking:

"I do not know you, sir, but you are acting most unwisely to put yourself forward to command men who all repudiate you, while to a man we will follow Buffalo Bill to death if need be."

The stock rangers had meanwhile come quietly up, and understanding the situation, Gentleman George said, firmly:

"We follow no man's lead but Buffalo Bill's, and if he refuses the command, there are Wild Bill and Lone Star to fall back on."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FIGHT BY NIGHT.

This decision of Gentleman George expressed the universal wish of the men, pony riders, settlers, miners, stable boys and stock-tenders, and Burke Bradshaw, would have been a fool to have further urged against it.

Seeing that he was not wanted as commander, he tried to surrender with as good grace as was possible, and so said:

"You men don't seem to know that I was once an army officer, and fought Indians out on the frontier, and naturally was better fitted to command in a battle than a pony rider.

"I was also anxious to do all I could to save the Overland Company's men and horses, interested as I was in it; but take command, Cody, and do be careful, for a mistake on your part may cost the lives of all of us."

"Very true, Bradshaw, and it is the great responsibility resting upon the one in command that makes me more than anxious to have some one else to shoulder it, though as I am justly the commander, as Captain of the Pony Riders' Patrol, and the men seem to wish me to resume control, I will do so."

Then, turning to the one in charge of the guns, he directed him to send a gun on each flank, with a dozen men accompanying it, and go quickly to the support of Wild Bill and Lone Star.

"Get into position as quickly as possible, and open fire, the gun on the right

firing first, and that will be the signal for us to charge.

"Fire several shells, and by that time we will be upon the redskins, if your guns have not already stampeded them, for they do not suspect their being here, or that we have been largely reinforced."

With this the two guns, with their crews and a support of a dozen men for each, moved off, and Buffalo Bill again arranged his plan of attacking with his main force by charging up the mole to the ridge.

He placed Captain Tom in charge of the left, and Gentleman George in command of the right wing, and told all the men that they would move forward slowly at first, halt and fire a volley of rifles, and then charge with revolvers.

The Indians, seeing that their foes had halted in the little vale where the two bands had united, at once felt that they dared not come on, knowing their weakness in numbers compared to their own.

They felt confident that the relief under Wild Bill had been all that had come, and had not the remotest idea that more were coming, or could do so, as Buffalo Bill had been also surprised by this great show of numbers, and the appearance of the two guns, and could not account for it.

But he would make no inquiries then, much as he desired to know.

Finding that the pale-faces still halted in the vale, just out of range of their fire, the Indians became emboldened.

There was one who was urging them on, and that one was the traitor guide, Kit Kirby.

He had his glass with him and he had counted the men coming with Wild Bill.

Surprised at their arrival, he yet had looked for no more.

His desire was to get possession of the wagon train, and the halting of the whites gave him a chance for action, and he proposed to the chief that he should take fifty braves, and, making a flank movement to the left, go back and capture the unprotected train, while there would yet be Indians enough left to give battle to their armed foes in front and perhaps defeat them by a bold rush at the proper moment.

The chief decided that this was just what should be done, and so the fifty picked warriors were told off to accompany their pale-face leader.

They started all right, moving off to their left, which was the right of the pale-face line, and when Wild Bill had gained position on the rise, being joined by the six-pounder and its support, and was about to open fire toward the main force of redskins, suddenly the command was given to wait a minute.

The keen eyes of Wild Bill had caught sight of a dark column of horsemen moving straight toward his position, and instantly the gun was sighted upon them and the order given to fire, a score of rifles flashing with the cannon, for they were within easy range of the smaller arms.

The shell went true and burst with a loud report and red glare right in the midst of the Indian horsemen, who had not seen their foes against the little fringe of timber, nor dreamed of danger.

Hardly had Wild Bill's signal gun fired, when there came a crash from half a mile away on the left, and the shell burst among the warriors of the main force.

At the same time a long line of flame shot forth from down in the mole, and then, with wild war cries, Buffalo Bill and the main force charged up the rise upon their foes.

The redskins, startled by the first gun on their left, were amazed at the second one on their right; and with the deadly volley in their front, and the charging from three quarters, and the continued bursting of shells, had all fight taken out of them and in wild terror, turned and fled.

It was a stampede, a panic; and flying in fear, they beheld behind them the large force of horsemen, as the flashing

of guns plainly revealed, while shrieking over their heads and bursting were the shells from the two six-pounders.

Thus it became a flying battle by night, the pursuers pressing hard after the redskins, who a short while before had believed themselves masters of the situation.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MAKING A WAGER.

That Buffalo Bill's plan was a good one and had been thoroughly well executed all the men under him admitted, except one.

That one was Burke Bradshaw, who, when the retreat was ordered, found himself with Captain Tom, to whom he said:

"You are with the train, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"My name is Bradshaw, and I am, though I may not say manager at the Headquarters Ranch, I represent the company, and I would be glad to give you any advice about settling in this country."

"Thank you, sir; but I shall be guided by my cousin, Captain Nat Starbuck, and—"

"What! are you Nat Starbuck's cousin?"

"Yes, sir, and my name is Starbuck—Thomas Starbuck."

"Indeed!"

"I am glad to meet you."

"And you are with these settlers?"

"They are with me, I may say, for they came because I did, and I am glad to learn from Mr. Cody that the country about the ranch is just the place for homes."

"Well, I should say other points, not so near the ranch."

"There is safety in numbers, sir, and our addition to those about the ranch, Buffalo Bill says, will have a very wholesome effect upon the Mormons, the Indians and the outlaws."

"Buffalo Bill is a fool, and knows nothing about it."

"I have found him anything but a fool, sir."

"He is only a pony rider, and the men elected him captain of the patrol because he—"

"Deserved it, eh?"

"No; there are far better men for the place; but he has had some lucky escapes and it has turned his head, and I fear after his luck to-night there will be no living in the same camp with him."

"You certainly do not call his victory to-night luck?"

"Nothing else."

"You see, you don't understand as we do out here about such things."

"I understand that he turned my train back when it was being led into a trap by a traitor guide."

"He made the guide a prisoner, and led us to where we made a successful defense against three attacks of the redskins."

"He risked his life to bring us aid, and brought it, and to-night he won a splendid victory."

"Yes, Mr. Bradshaw, I understand Buffalo Bill, as I also understand that for some reason you do not like him, and disliking a man, it is hard to see his virtues."

Burke Bradshaw bit his lips and was silent for a moment.

Then he asked:

"You say your guide was a traitor?"

"He was."

"What was his name?"

"Kit Kirby."

"Ah! there was a man of that name hanged at the ranch some months ago."

"So Buffalo Bill told me."

"He was said to be the Danite captain known as Red Hand."

"Buffalo Bill said our guide was the very double of the man that was hanged."

"Where is he now?"

"He escaped."

"Escaped?"

"Yes."

"Where and how?"

"Buffalo Bill bound him, and he was put in the rear of one of the wagons."

"On our turning back, when the Indians were pursuing us, bound as he was, he worked his way out of the wagon, and,

falling in the trail, the Indians picked him up."

"A bold fellow and a most clever and daring escape."

"It was."

"Did the fall hurt him?"

"Not seriously, for I saw him afterwards among the redskins who attacked us, and in the flight of them before us this evening."

"Well, I suppose he will turn renegade and live with the Indians now, giving us no end of trouble; but I cannot understand his being a double of Kit Kirby the Danite, and also bearing his name."

"Buffalo Bill could not understand it either."

"Then there has been a great blunder made by some one at the ranch in hanging the wrong man."

"Well, whoever was hanged deserved it, from all accounts, and my guide also richly deserved it, and I am very sorry he escaped, though Buffalo Bill seemed determined to recapture him to-night."

"He can never do it."

"Well, I feel that he may, for all I have seen that wonderful man undertake yet he has carried out."

"Bah! he was born for luck, and that is all."

"Well, Buffalo Bill caught sight of the guide to-night, when he rallied the Indians for a minute, for he saw him by the light of the flashing revolvers, and he told me then that he would make the effort of his life to recapture him."

"A boast he knew he could not make good, for Buffalo Bill can never capture that man."

"I've got money that says he will, Mr. Bradshaw," said a voice behind them, and Wild Bill rode up alongside.

"You heard what Buffalo Bill boasted he could do?"

"Call it threat, boast, or what you will, I'll bet if Buffalo Bill went off on the special duty of catching that man he will either kill or capture him, and my money talks."

"Name your sum."

"One hundred."

"Good! I'll take the bet."

"Captain Starbuck here will hold the stakes, so we will go to yonder camp-fire and count out the money," and Wild Bill pointed to a fire some of the men had built to light up the field, for they were busy collecting the wounded and the dead, for half a dozen brave fellows had fallen, never to rise again, and a score or more men were more or less seriously wounded.

The men were dropping back from the pursuit four and five at a time, and were halting upon the field as they came, and riding up to the fire, Burke Bradshaw and Wild Bill counted out their money and gave it to Captain Tom to hold for them.

In an hour the men had all come in, with one exception—Buffalo Bill, and none of the men had seen him since he dashed ahead in hot pursuit of the flying redskins.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BURKE BRADSHAW AGAIN.

The men had gathered the wounded together and were ready to carry them back to a camp on the stream where it was decided the whole force would remain for the night.

The dead had also been collected, the Indians with the others, and were strapped upon ponies to be taken for burial near the night camp.

The slain horses had been stripped of their trappings and all were in readiness to move, only waiting the return of Buffalo Bill.

In his absence, Burke Bradshaw sought again to assume command, but Wild Bill was not a man to stand the slightest nonsense, and hearing him giving orders, he went up to him and said in his drawling way:

"See here, Bradshaw, in the absence of Buffalo Bill I command this outfit, and should I drop dead with heart disease, then Little Lone Star plays a full hand at the commanding business, so just give no

more orders here unless they come from me."

"Why is not Buffalo Bill here to take command, then?"

"He's off winning the money I bet you he would win," was the reply, and Wild Bill turned away.

But at heart he was really anxious about the absence of Buffalo Bill, and went from man to man to learn who had been the last one to see him.

Having gleaned the information that he had been seen on the right of the line, charging after an Indian who wore a chief's war-bonnet, Wild Bill decided to take a few of his men and ride over that part of the field.

"If they have captured him I will take the whole command on their trail," he said, in his decided way.

Telling the men to build fires and get what rest they could, he started out on the search for his devoted pard, for whom he felt an almost fatherly regard, though he was only about ten years the senior of Buffalo Bill.

Still he had known Buffalo Bill since he was known as Little Billy, when only ten years of age he had begun his career as a mounted messenger on the Santa Fe trail from wagon trail to wagon trail.

With the horses in a canter, and every man on the watch, Wild Bill rode first to the spot where he had heard that his pard had last been seen.

He had the man along who had been the last one to see him from all accounts, and from there on he would stretch his men out in a line and follow on over the trail of flight, so that if dead or wounded Buffalo Bill would be found.

He felt no anxiety for the command left behind, or the wagon train.

They would be all right, and he had called Little Lone Star to one side before going, and told him that he was to take command.

"In case," he added, "that Burke Bradshaw tries to usurp your power, as he did Buffalo Bill's and mine, put him at once under arrest, and bind and gag him if need be, for the fellow is trying to run the ranch and all else, and if I am not mistaken, Captain Nat Starbuck will have to jump on him hard before long."

"I'll take care of him," was Lone Star's quiet comment, and it meant a great deal from him.

So Wild Bill and his little band rode away in search of Buffalo Bill, dead or alive, and they had hardly gotten out of sight before Burke Bradshaw showed again that he considered himself in charge.

"Come, men, there is no need of our remaining among these rocks, without blankets and food, so we will go to the Horseshoe Hill and camp, for, after saving them from massacre, the train people ought to be only too glad to feed and entertain us."

"I assure you that they will, sir," said Captain Tom, quickly.

The men had stripped for the fight, so their extra blankets and all the provisions had gone to Horseshoe Hill on the pack animals after crossing the ford, Black Diamond, Buffalo Bill's negro man-of-all-work, being in charge.

The victory being won, the men were only too willing to go and get a good supper, and then turn in for a rest for the balance of the night, for they were very tired, so they were very quick to obey the command of Burke Bradshaw, as both Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were gone.

But suddenly Lone Star stepped forward and said:

"Hold on, men!"

"You get your orders from me, for I was left in command."

"And who gave you the right to command here above me?" shouted Burke Bradshaw.

"Wild Bill did."

"Bah! he has no right to say who shall command in his absence."

"See here, Bradshaw, Buffalo Bill is the authorized captain at the post, Wild Bill is his first lieutenant, and I am the next in rank, and I was left in command."

"If Gentleman George desires to take his stock-tenders away, and Hading to call off his settlers and miners, Birney the stable men, and Captain Tom here his train people, they are at liberty to do so, but the pony riders remain here, and, as I understand it, the force is united, and all are under the same command."

"You are only the clerk of Captain Starbuck, and have no authority out of the ranch office, so I advise you not to make trouble for yourself."

Lone Star spoke with the utmost coolness, and the men at once saw that he was right, and Gentleman George said:

"We stand by you, Lone Star, for you command here."

"That's the talk—me too!" called out Birney.

"You bet we are in it to stay, Lone Star!" cried Hading.

"I am under your command, sir; no one else has authority here," firmly added Captain Tom.

"By Heaven! you are a lot of fools, and you, sir, an ingrate, after my bringing the men to save you."

"I wash my hands of all responsibility and leave you!" shouted Burke Bradshaw.

"You will remain in this camp, Bradshaw," said Lone Star, firmly.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LONE STAR'S NERVE.

At the calmly uttered words of Little Lone Star, Burke Bradshaw, who had his foot in his stirrup to mount and leave camp, took it out, wheeled and confronted the man who dared to give him such an order.

"Did I understand aright, Lone Star, or did my ears deceive me?"

"If you have brains enough to grasp what I said you should have understood me, and I have not heard you complain that your hearing was bad."

"By Heaven, but I believe you intend to insult me!"

"No, I intend to convince you that I command here and that you must obey me."

"I obey you."

"Come, Bradshaw, I wish no more argument."

"Take your horse out and remain in camp."

"Not by your order, sir."

"Yes, by my order."

"Obey me!" and the revolver of Little Lone Star covered the heart of Burke Bradshaw by a movement so rapid that no one seemed to know how it was done.

Burke Bradshaw had beyond doubt not dreamed that Lone Star would go so far. He had expected to bluff him.

Failing to awe either Buffalo Bill or Wild Bill into giving him the command, which he so longed for, he was sure that Lone Star would not dare confront him as they did.

That Lone Star even did more astounded him.

He knew the Texan well by name, and as he saw his face in the firelight, he realized that he was not one to trifle with.

He was covered, so dared not move.

Yet he did not wish to back down, to yield if he could get out of it, so he called out:

"I appeal to you, gentlemen, the captains of the different squads here, if this man has a right to threaten my life."

Gentleman George was one who never dodged an issue, and he replied, grumpily.

"If you appeal to me, as one of the leaders of a squad, I will say frankly, that you have been shown mercy to-night that, in my humble opinion you did not deserve, for in this country a man must obey or take the consequences."

A cheer greeted these words, but as a silence followed, and, Bradshaw's eyes rested upon Captain Tom, the latter seemed to feel that he wished his opinion, and so said:

"I think, sir, you have no right to bring your authority in conflict with those who appear to have the right to command."

Another cheer greeted this opinion.

But still Bradshaw did not yield, and turned to Hading, who said abruptly:

"Obey, man, and don't make a fool of yourself."

But he seemed not yet convinced, though the laughter following Hading's remark cut him deeply.

So he turned to Birney, while one of the pony riders called out:

"Watch him, Lone Star, for he's only waiting to catch you off your guard and plug you."

"Do you want me to tell you what I think?" said Birney, the captain of the Stable Boys' Rangers.

"Yes, I want to know what fools you all can be!" was the sneering reply.

"Well, if I had been Buffalo Bill, in the first place, I would have shot you, and in the next place, when you opposed Wild Bill I'd have plugged you ag'in; and I'm only sorry, as you escaped them, that Lone Star didn't kill yer for mutiny, and stand his trial at the post, with every mother's son of us here as witnesses in his favor, and only your own body to show you was the victim of two much conceit and freshness."

"There you have an honest opinion from an honest man."

The yells of applause and laughter that greeted this opinion showed even a man of Burke Bradshaw's conceit that he was going too far, and he at once said:

"Lone Star, I yield to the crowd against me, but not to you, and remain in camp."

"Birney, stake my horse out until I am ready for him."

"You will yield to me, Bradshaw, and stake your own horse out, for you are not at the post now, where the stablemen have to care for your horse."

"I will remain in camp, and it is his work to care for my horse—let him do it."

"I will if Lone Star says so," said Birney.

But Burke Bradshaw had gone too far, and Lone Star was white with anger.

In an instant he was close to the man, and thrusting the muzzle of his revolver close into his face, he shouted:

"Do as I tell you, or, by Heaven, I will kill you where you stand!"

The man turned livid and gave a quick glance around him.

But the eyes of Lone Star fascinated him, for he again looked into them.

There was only determination there to keep his word, and Burke Bradshaw said in a trembling voice:

"You shall answer for this, Lone Star."

"Obey!"

Then Bradshaw turned, grasped the rein of his horse, and led him away, Lone Star following.

The horse was staked out, and then Lone Star said:

"Back to the fire, sir!"

The man obeyed.

"Give me your weapons!"

He hesitated an instant, but did as he was told.

"Bring me a lariat, Birney!"

It was brought, and, unaided, save by his revolvers, to subdue the man, Lone Star bound him securely, hands and feet.

Then he took Bradshaw's own knife, and, thrusting the scabbard into his mouth bound it there, completely gagging him.

"Now we will have no more orders from you while I am in command," said Lone Star, and he had just turned away when the rapid clatter of hoofs was heard and one of Wild Bill's men dashed up and cried:

"Mount, Lone Star, and follow me with all your force, for you are needed."

CHAPTER XXXV.

SHOTS IN THE DARKNESS.

When Wild Bill and his men rode the two miles to the spot where Buffalo Bill had last been seen, they found there the dead body of an Indian chief and a horse which had been overworked.

The trail of flight from there was a

little to the left, as though to avoid a range of hills just ahead, and it was not beyond this that the pale-faces had followed the redskins.

"Pards, we will string out here and move forward," said Wild Bill, and the score of men stretched out in line for a long distance, covering the entire trail of retreat.

Then they moved forward, and after half a mile came to a canyon leading into the range on the left on one end of their line, and a much smaller one on their right.

That both penetrated through the range of foothills Wild Bill and several of the pony riders knew, for they had scouted up in that country when on patrol duty, and in search of cattle and horses the Indians had run off from the post in their raids.

So the little band divided and each party passed through a canyon not over half a mile in length.

Thus penetrating the foothills, and just where the Indians had been discovered by Buffalo Bill early in the day, coming to reinforce their comrades, they came out into a large and beautiful valley.

It ran for many miles along the base of the mountain range, with the foothills a shelter on the other side.

The valley varied from one to five miles in width, and, sheltered from the north by the lofty range, it was a most beautiful and desirable spot to establish houses in, only it was too near the homes of the Indians, whose villages were upon the summit of the range a dozen or more miles distant.

The valley was the favorite hunting ground of the Indians and their winter home, but Spring having set in they had retreated to their villages in the fastnesses of the lofty range.

A river ran through the valley, nearer the foothills than the mountain range, and across it Wild Bill knew that there were but two fords in many miles.

No where else could the river be crossed without the certainty of losing one's life.

If Buffalo Bill had still pressed on after the traitor guide, for certainly he would not have pursued alone the Indians, he had gone doubtless to the nearest ford, distant from the foothills a little over a mile.

"Buffalo Bill must have been very sure of capturing his man to have pushed on into the valley," said Wild Bill, when the two parties, having passed through the canyons, united in the valley.

"He's hard to give up when he has once taken a hand in a game to win," answered one of the pony riders, and this was the opinion of all.

"Well, pards, we'll stretch out again and go to the ford.

"You, who know where it is, guide the way, one on each end of the line, while I take the center.

"If you miss it, come along the stream toward the center.

"I lighted matches in the canyon I came through and saw only the tracks of two horses, one was iron-shod, and it was Buffalo Bill's; the other was not shod and bore the man he was after.

"It was much longer through the little canyon, and they all took the larger and shorter way in their retreat.

"Now, move ahead, pards,"

With this order Wild Bill began to advance again, his men stretching out in line and doing the same.

They had gone only a few rods when suddenly the whole line halted.

They saw flashes far ahead and heard the report of rifles.

"It is at the ford and Buffalo Bill is corralled there.

"Sterling, ride back with all speed and tell Lone Star to bring the whole command up with full speed, for they are wanted, as I am sure the Indians have rallied from being reinforced.

"We want the guns also. Now ride for your life."

Sterling was away like a rocket, and then Wild Bill said:

"Call the men in, and we will advance

together and as rapidly as possible, for as long as that rifle flashes Bill needs aid, and it tells he is alive and at bay."

While the men were being called in Wild Bill explained that the rifle Buffalo Bill had was a new repeating weapon, firing sixteen consecutive shots, and which had been presented to him by Captain Tom Starbuck, who had brought a couple of them with him.

Wild Bill also told the men that the ford was at a bend of the river, and where a sandbar had formed from the opposite point, leaving only a few rods of deep water to swim through, and the descent from the bank of rock was by a narrow break in the cliff, and it was this which Buffalo Bill was defending.

"There goes his rifle again, boys, so we'll ride for it," shouted Wild Bill, and he led the way at a run toward the river.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE TRAITOR.

When the Indians were in full flight Buffalo Bill realized that the victory had been won, and that the men did not need his services as commander.

He had one hope in his mind, and that was to capture the treacherous guide who called himself Kit Kirby.

That he deserved the direst punishment there was not the slightest doubt, but then Buffalo Bill was anxious to know if there had been a mistake in hanging the man at the post as Kit Kirby the Danite, when the guide might be the real criminal.

Both he and Captain Starbuck had recognized the hanged man as the Danite, and he had been captured by Wild Bill in outlawry.

But here was a man who was his double and who claimed to be Kit Kirby.

So Buffalo Bill was most anxious to capture the traitor guide, and bent every energy to that end.

He had been close up in the fight to the Indians, and had been told by several pony riders just where they had seen the pale-face among the redskins.

At last he, too, discovered him by the bright glare of the flashing guns.

This was enough for Buffalo Bill, and flanking around he made a bold dash for the man.

He beheld him shouting at the braves who were stampeding, and he rode at him hard, whirling his lasso, as he did so, for he wished to take the man alive.

The Indians had fled, and the outlaw turned to go also, for he saw Buffalo Bill coming, and, as he did not fire upon him, he evidently had no more ammunition for his firearms.

One Indian came toward him, and he was a chief, for Buffalo Bill saw that he wore the war bonnet of a leader, as, once out of the timber, it was bright starlight, and he could see fairly well.

Why the two, the guide and the chief, did not fly on after the main force of redskins Buffalo Bill did not at first understand.

He saw them bear away to the right, and he knew that they were going to take the longer way through the smaller canyon through the foothills.

This could only mean that they wished to entice him there for a purpose.

"I'll spoil your little game, Kit Kirby," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he threw his rifle to his shoulder.

Riding at a run as he was, and the two fugitives also going at full speed, the chances were a hundred to one that his bullet would miss.

But he aimed at the horse of Kirby.

With the crack of the rifle the horse stumbled, recovered himself, stumbled again, and then went down heavily.

But, quick as a flash, the rider caught on his feet, and at the same instant, with wonderful dexterity, leaped up behind the Indian chief.

"My God! that is self-preservation with a vengeance!" said Buffalo Bill, as he saw the Indian chief suddenly hurled from the horse by the outlaw, killing his red ally to aid his own escape, well knowing

that the horse could not carry double weight.

The delay had been but an instant, and the outlaw was in full flight again.

The Indian was writhing in agony as Buffalo Bill passed by him, but gave his war cry and shout of dying defiance.

"Poor fellow. He may have told the chief to mount behind him when I shot his horse, and that was his reward.

"I believe he knifed him in the back,

"I must catch him, yet I dare not fire again, as it is too risky, and I might kill the man, not the horse."

So the pony rider drove his spurs deep and urged his horse on to still greater effort.

The fugitive was certainly well mounted, and he kept his own well, though he did not seem able to force his horse to drop the animal ridden by Buffalo Bill further behind.

That he was unarmed, or, having weapons, had no ammunition, was certain, as he had not once fired upon his pursuer.

A knife he might have, but that would only be of service when it came to a hand-to-hand conflict between him and Buffalo Bill.

When the outlaw saw the pony rider gaining, as he did when he drove the spurs hard into the flanks of his straining horse, he also began to urge the animal he rode to greater effort.

They came to the canyon not over a hundred yards apart, and then not either animal was gaining on the other.

Passing into the valley, Buffalo Bill felt convinced that the Indians had gone by the upper ford, where the approach was broad, and many could cross together, or if any had gone by the one for which the outlaw was heading, it had been a small band only.

That the outlaw held his course straight for the ford was sure proof to Buffalo Bill that he knew where he was going, and this meant a knowledge of the country.

So across the valley the two went at full speed, toward the river, not an Indian in sight, as they, too, had ridden rapidly, had started ahead of the outlaw and his chief comrade, and, passing through the large canyon, had cut off over a mile.

Whatever Indians had gone by the lower ford were already across the river, the pony rider argued to himself as he rode on.

"I must take the chances of a shot and bring down his horse, for there may be redskins on this side," said Buffalo Bill, as he saw the fugitive rapidly nearing the ford.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

"I must not hit him, and the chances are, at this rapid pace, to kill him, the horse, or to miss.

"I will halt and fire, so as to make sure."

As Buffalo Bill said this, he suddenly drew rein, guided his horse with a word, and raised his rifle to his shoulder.

The fugitive was over a hundred yards ahead of him, and each bound of his horse was adding the distance of ten feet more.

The river was only an eighth of a mile away, and Buffalo Bill had begun to fear that the Indians had come that way, after all, having discovered they were not pursued through the canyon.

Some of the braves, at least, would be there, and if they had crossed for safety they would be within easy call if they knew there was but one man to deal with.

Truly realizing his danger, and that the one shot would warn them, he was yet not the man to give up while there was a chance of success.

That the white guide and the chief had been missed he did not doubt, and the braves would think that the ones pursued were they, and would rush to the rescue.

With all these dreads staring him in the face, Buffalo Bill raised his rifle and ran his eyes along the sights.

The fugitive seemed to fear that the shot was for him, and he threw himself over

on the side of his horse, and rode in a direction to shield himself.

The trigger was touched the moment the pony rider's eye covered the horse, the aim being at his head, as well as it was possible, so as to miss the rider.

The flash came, mingling with the report, and the horse went down hard, rolling over and over.

The guide fell heavily, too, but he was quickly upon his feet, though the fall had shaken him up considerably, and, like a deer, he darted along on foot for the ford, crying out as he did so in the Indian tongue:

"Let my red brothers come!"

"It is the White Eagle* that follows me, and he is alone!"

"Aha, my fine fellow, you speak Injun, do you?" cried Buffalo Bill, as he heard the words of the guide and his call for help.

And the call was answered in the distance by a series of wild yells.

But they did not cause Buffalo Bill to turn and fly.

His game was too near him, and his horse was a good one, while he knew he could depend upon the splendid rifle given him by Captain Tom.

Driving the spurs hard into the flanks of his horse, he rode on after the running guide, who certainly made splendid time.

He was nearing the river fast, and once there, he could dash down the narrow pass in the rocky bank, plunge into the water and be safe.

He would have the Indians to cover his retreat, but, to his great delight, Buffalo Bill felt sure that they had crossed the river, and now had to recross to save the fugitive.

He heard their voices, and the loud splashing of water, and this convinced him that they were coming rapidly over, for the words of the fugitive in the still night had been understood.

Nearer drew the man to the ford, running like a racehorse, and gaining upon him came the determined and daring pony rider.

A hundred yards more had the fugitive to go, two hundred more had the pony rider, and as the river was several hundred yards wide at the ford, the redskins had considerable distance to cross to get into position, though just how far over they were Buffalo Bill could not tell.

Deep and hard went the rowels into the flanks of the straining horse, and with a mighty effort, as though realizing just what his master expected of him, the animal lengthened his bounds, quickened his movements, and went along at a greater speed than ever before.

"I will catch him," cried Buffalo Bill, and he ended his words with his terrible war cry, which was answered by the braves in the river, crossing to the aid of the traitor guide.

The fugitive glanced over his shoulder and saw the pony rider close upon him.

As he did not fire, he knew at once his desire to take him alive.

He increased his speed with a mighty effort, while he again called upon his red friends for aid:

"Come, my red brothers, come! and you capture the White Eagle and save me!"

"Don't be so sure of that, Kit Kirby!" shouted Buffalo Bill, when the yells of the Indians crossing the river had answered this second call for help.

In another moment the fugitive would have reached the ford, but, just then, the straining horse swept by him, wheeled, and, leaping to the ground, Buffalo Bill confronted his foe, who, with a savage oath, whipped out his long knife and stood at bay at close quarters.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FIGHTING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

The man stood with his knife raised in one hand, a revolver leveled in another, but Buffalo Bill laughed and said:

* Buffalo Bill bears half-a-dozen Indian names, given him by the different tribes, the Sioux, Pawnees, Cheyennes, Navahoes, Utes, Plutes, etc. He is known as Long Hair, Deadly Eye, White Buffalo, Hand-that-Kills, Pale-Face, Path-Flinder, White Eagle, etc.—The Author.

"Your revolver is harmless, Kit Kirby, for if it was loaded you would have fired at me.

"Mine is loaded, though, so drop that knife."

"I will not."

"Obey me, or I will take it from your hand!"

"You cannot do it!"

"I know your game—to wait until those redskins arrive, but I'll down you and be ready for them when they come.

"Drop that knife!"

"I will not!"

"I do not wish to kill you—"

"You want to hang me."

"That is in the future.

"Again, and for the last time, I say, drop that knife, or I will shoot it from your hand."

"No!"

The yell of the Indians crossing the river convinced Buffalo Bill that he had not a moment to lose, and quickly his finger touched trigger.

The knife, held high in threatening attitude, dropped from the hand of Kit Kirby, who uttered a wild yell of rage and pain and started to dodge by his foe to the ford, not thirty feet away.

But Buffalo Bill was upon him, and, with a wonderful exhibition of his giant strength, he hurled the man to the ground with a force that partially stunned him.

Seizing him by his coat, he dragged him rapidly to the edge of the cliff at one side of the pass down to the ford, and, standing across his body he glanced out upon the river.

A moment more, and he realized that he would have been too late, for the Indians, strung out in a long line, were coming across the wide river, following the sand-bar from the point on the other shore where the water was a little over knee-deep.

Those in the lead were just entering the deep water from the end of the point, and a swim of a hundred feet would land them at the break in the bank just thirty feet beneath where the pony rider stood.

It made a thrilling picture, with the Indians riding to the rescue of the traitor guide, whom Buffalo Bill stood over, one foot on either side of his body, while he held his rifle ready to fire upon the nearest Indians, and his panting, hard-run horse stood with head bent low, and the bright starlight lighting up the scene.

Just where Buffalo Bill stood then was the trunk of a fallen pine, and it served as a protection to him.

He was not long in taking in the situation, and he said, sternly:

"If you move, Kit Kirby, I'll put my foot upon your throat to quiet you," and with the last word he fired.

The Indian in the lead, and whose war bonnet showed him to be a chief, fell from his horse into the river and was swept away by the current, while the bewildered pony swam down stream, and not to a landing at the break in the bank, so was carried off to his doom.

Whatever the next brave thought, he had no time to decide, for again the repeating rifle cracked, and he fell over on the neck of his pony, clinging there, while the startled animal wheeled about and made for the other shore.

The whole line had now halted, but only to get their weapons ready, and bullets and arrows quickly pattered about the pony rider.

But he was protected by the edge of the cliff, and more by the fallen tree, and, taking his chances, he fired over upon the redskins.

Then, stooping, he grasped his prisoner by his clothing and dragged him rapidly along to a spot forty feet away, and where the bullets and arrows were not falling, for the Indians had fired where they had seen the flash of the rifle.

Then Buffalo Bill had, still standing across the body of the prisoner, raised the splendid rifle, and as rapidly as he could pull trigger, had pumped out shot after shot, firing at Indian and pony down in the river.

This sudden, rapid firing astounded the

Indians, while it also dropped several from their saddles, and also brought down two or three ponies.

They were not aware that one rifle could fire like that, and believing others had come up to the rescue of the pony rider, they were falling back, when loudly Kit Kirby called out:

"Be braves, and don't fly like squaws and children."

"There is only the White Eagle here."

"His rifle—"

But the voice was silenced by the foot of the pony rider being pressed hard down upon the throat, choking off all utterance.

Still pressing hard, Buffalo Bill quickly reloaded his rifle, and when he removed his foot the prisoner lay limp and motionless.

"You cannot fool me, Kit Kirby, for you are not hurt, or insensible, only playing possum; but if you raise that voice of yours again I'll choke you so you'll remember it."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BUFFALO BILL'S PRELIMINENT.

The Indians, demoralized by their defeat an hour before, were more easily frightened back than they would have been under ordinary circumstances, and they quickly fell back from under close range to the cliff.

But the voice of the traitor guide calling to them in their own tongue prevented a stampede at the fear that many of the whites were there.

They could not understand how one man could fire a rifle as though there were a dozen weapons.

The explanation of the outlaw to them, had been cut off by the foot of Buffalo Bill pressing hard upon his throat.

When his weapon was again reloaded the pony rider gave a sigh of relief.

He knew that if the Indians in the river had made a rush for the ford they could have made it, and not only forced him to fly, but either to leave his prisoner or to kill him.

He did not dare attempt to take time then to bind him, for his whole attention was devoted to watching the Indians, and his lasso was on the horn of his saddle, and his horse, at the firing, had moved fifty feet further away, as some of the arrows and bullets had gone near him.

Taking the still seemingly unconscious prisoner again by the collar, Buffalo Bill dragged him back to his first position behind the tree, and from there kept his eyes upon the Indians, who were grouped together in the river, now over a hundred yards distant.

That he could have dropped several more by emptying his matchless rifle, the pony rider well knew, but that was not his nature, for he never killed wantonly.

If they again came to attack him, he would fire to kill, but not merely to shoot them because they were in range.

Others were coming out from the further shore to join their comrades, and he did not now doubt but that the whole force had crossed the river there and were coming back to the river to make a fight there, as they believed the pale-faces meant to pursue them up into the mountains.

If their foes attempted to cross the river there they could inflict heavy loss upon them, they well knew, and perhaps drive them back, turning a defeat into victory.

But there was one thing the Indians seemed to have overlooked, and that was their mortal terror of the "wheel guns," as they called the cannon.

Buffalo Bill felt assured that it would not be long before help came to him.

As soon as he was missed, Wild Bill or Lone Star would come after him very quickly.

But if they would only come before the redskins realized that he was there alone and charged across the river, he would be thankful.

Still the prisoner remained as silent as though unconscious, and Buffalo Bill had it flash through his mind that he had really hurt him, perhaps had broken his

neck with the pressure of his foot upon his throat.

Then he laughed, and called out:

"See here, Kirby, playing 'possum don't go with me."

"I choked you a little, to shut off your gab, but I didn't hurt you."

"You are too tough for that, so you need not try to play any game on me."

"I want water," came in a feeble voice.

"Well, the river is so near, and yet so far, for I cannot get it."

"Give me water, for God's sake!"

"Can't do it, for if I left you to get it I'd want something mighty quick, and would not be able to get it."

"If I could only tie you, I'd feel better, or take you away with me."

"Guess I'll try both soon."

The prisoner knew that Buffalo Bill did not wish to kill him, and for that reason he could do pretty much as he pleased.

His hand was bleeding, for the bullet fired at him to disarm him had cut off his third finger, and he determined to make another effort in some way to get the advantage, so said, as he feared Buffalo Bill would force him to go away with him:

"I tell you, I am in a bad way."

"I am bleeding to death with my wounded hand, and your foot nearly crushed my throat."

"Well, I am sorry, but I can do nothing just now, for if I retreat from here, those redskins will be after me, and my tired horse cannot carry double very fast."

Finding that his entreaties were in vain, Kit Kirby's weak voice suddenly thundered forth in the Indian tongue:

"Come, red brothers, come!"

"The White Eagle is here alone, and has me a prisoner."

"His rifle is a many-shooter. Come!"

Again the foot of the pony rider pressed hard upon the throat, but not without a struggle, to get there, as the prisoner strove hard to prevent, and to trip him up.

But suddenly the cocked rifle muzzle was pressed hard upon his temple, and the prisoner knew that Buffalo Bill meant it when he said:

"I do not wish to kill you, but I will if you move or cry out again. I swear it!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE RETREAT.

With just time to utter the words to the prisoner, Buffalo Bill had to turn upon the Indians, for the numbers in the river had increased, and the call for aid from the guide had made them determine upon a charge, or at least to test just how dangerous the "many shot" rifle was.

Without waiting for them to come nearer, Buffalo Bill opened fire upon the crowd of warriors, little over a hundred yards distant, and emptying the rifle he at once stooped, seized the prisoner and dragged him rapidly toward his horse.

The man was one who boasted of his strength, but he had met his master.

He struggled hard, but his wounded hand was against him, and his throat did indeed feel the pressure the foot had made upon it.

In vain he tried to drag away from Buffalo Bill, to trip him, to hurt him, for he struck him severe blows and twice buried his teeth in the flesh of his leg.

The pony rider bore it all, uttered no outcry, and at last reached his horse.

Then the prisoner made a supreme effort, for he realized that he was being mastered.

But suddenly the doubled hand of Buffalo Bill was driven hard into his face, once, twice, thrice!

There was no playing possum this time when Kit Kirby fell back.

The blows had been severe and stunned him.

He was limp as a rag, for he was insensible.

To throw him across his saddle and then spring up behind was the work of an instant, and once mounted with his prisoner, Buffalo Bill quickly loaded his rifle once more and then started off at a gallop.

But he had not gone very far before two distinct and different sounds came to his ears.

One was in his rear, where the loud splashing of water and yells told that the redskins were rapidly crossing.

The other sound was in his front, and he knew the voices of his comrades rushing to his rescue.

He gave a loud hail, and then halting, called out:

"Come, boys, come!"

"They are crossing the river in force!"

The next moment Wild Bill was by his side and grasping his hand.

"You have the body of the traitor there?"

"Yes, but it's alive—only stunned."

"One of you men halt here and look to this prisoner!" and Buffalo Bill bundled the prisoner off of his saddle, slipped over into it himself, and was at the head of his pony riders once more.

"Watch him, for he is a bad one," he called out to the man who took Kit Kirby in charge, and away he rode with Wild Bill and those following him to the ford.

They reached the bank just as the pass to the water was crowded with redskins hastening forward, while out in the deep part of the stream others were crossing, and further back on the sandbar came many more.

But the pony riders opened with their revolvers at close range and at once began a fierce fight to hold the narrow pass.

The redskins were maddened now, having run into a trap, and they fought with desperation, while others came to take the places of their slain.

But the pony riders were now fighting as they liked best, at close quarters with revolvers, and they poured in such a galling fire, the redskins were forced to retreat under the shelter of the banks.

Then they took refuge where they were safe from the fire of the pony riders, and a chief called out to those crossing the river and those who were on the other shore, that there were but few pale-faces there, and if they all came over with a rush they could kill them and hold the place against others, should they come.

The chief's words were answered with wildest yells, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"Hear that!"

"Those yells show that they have been reinforced from their village, for there are five hundred of them there if there is one."

Wild Bill had told of sending back for the men, so one of the pony riders was told to go with all haste to hurry them on.

"If they beat us back from here the victory will be theirs."

"Bring the guns on, too, with all speed," shouted Buffalo Bill.

Then he turned to the pony riders and told them to use their rifles upon the redskins who were now crossing as fast as they could ride through the water.

The river was black with them, and the shots of the pony riders told heavily upon them, yet did not check them, their comrades under the bank already safe from the fire urging them on.

But suddenly loud cries were heard in the distance and Buffalo Bill said:

"They are coming, and not a moment too soon, for I was just about to order the retreat."

"See there, Wild Bill, how many there are!" and he pointed out upon the black moving mass in the river

CHAPTER XLI.

THE FIGHT AT THE FORD.

The Indians had evidently "sized up" the number of the pony riders, and felt that they could easily overwhelm them by crossing the river.

Many braves must fall, they knew, for they were well aware of how deadly was the pony riders' aim; but they could kill or capture the band, and with the advantages of the ford for defense from the land side, would be ready to meet the main force of pale-faces when they came on.

They must wipe out their defeat, must drive the enemy back in flight, check the advance toward their homes and go back to their villages in triumph.

The Indians felt nerved to the most daring deeds, as several hundred more braves had met them on the other side of the river and now they had double the force to fight with that they had had in the battle beyond the foothills.

The "key" then was the ford, and if they could get across that they would soon be victors.

But the pale-faces that were coming the Indians knew were not so near.

They could not hear them, nor the roll of the cannon wheels as they bounded over the rough plain, as the splashing of hundreds of horses in the water, the firing and the shouts drowned all other sounds.

Buffalo Bill knew that the men coming up needed no orders.

Over two-thirds of them were experienced fighters, and they heard the shots, the yells, knew that there was a river before them, a ford, and that a small band were at bay against an army of redskins.

"I want one of you here, another on the other side of the pass to the ford—that is all."

"I will tell them when to fire."

"The men can dismount and go into the fight at will, for their foe is before them."

That was all the order that Buffalo Bill gave as commander, and as the men dashed up they dismounted, threw their reins to one in a dozen of their number, and springing to positions along the cliff began to fire.

Captain Tom Starbuck and his train men were there, and they had begun to realize just what frontier fighting was.

The redskins in the river and crowding up the narrow pass, suddenly discovered that the fire of their foes increased tenfold.

They still pressed on, however, confident in numbers, and by their force were about to break up through the pass, when Buffalo Bill called out:

"Give them a shot down through the pass from one of the guns!"

The deep roar of the gun and broad red glare of the flash came together, and at the very moment that it was needed, for the pass was too small for many men to get about it to make a strong defense.

But the cannon did more than a thousand rifles, as the deep thunder of its discharge, the red lightning of its flame lighting up the scene, the shrieking of the shell and its bursting spread terror to the hearts of the redskins, even had its execution in their crowded ranks not been terrible.

With wild yells they turned and fled, leaving a writhing mass of braves and ponies in the pass.

Into the river they dashed, whether mounted or on foot, while those who were rapidly coming across halted in dismay, hardly knowing what to do.

"It is hard to punish them when they are beaten, but the lesson must be a severe one."

"Fire your guns, first upon the river, and then across upon the other shore," said Buffalo Bill.

There were men in his band who were not as merciful as he was, and they kept up a constant fire from their rifles upon the now flying Indians.

The cannon, also, after bursting a shell each over the braves in the river, hurrying back for shelter, began to shell the dark timber on the other bank.

For half an hour this was kept up, the rifles now remaining silent, and then Buffalo Bill gave the order to cease firing, and next came the command for the force to start upon the return trail to Horseshoe Hill.

The loss of life among the Indians had been great, and scores of their ponies had also fallen.

Most of the dead had been swept away by the river, but others still lay upon the

shore under the cliff and in the grass, among them several who were but slightly wounded and had been captured.

These braves Buffalo Bill bade go after their comrades and tell them to return and bury their dead, adding that they must remember that the pale-faces were able to defend their homes, would punish all redskins who attacked them, and that the renegade white man would be put to death.

If the redmen wished to live in peace with the pale-faces, the latter were willing, but if they were determined it should be war, then war it would be.

With this the braves were set free and told to recross the river, which they did with a very urgent desire to get away.

The death list of the command in the battle at the ford had been remarkably small, only two men having been killed and a score wounded, for they had been greatly protected by their position.

Giving orders for the march, Buffalo Bill then called Wild Bill and Lone Star to him and said to the former:

"Pard, I want you to take my prisoner and hasten on to the post, to report to Captain Starbuck all that has happened, and you will take Burke Bradshaw along also, as Lone Star was forced to make a prisoner of him.

"Then get what rest you can, for I shall leave Lone Star in command and go on to Valley Farm at once to return with the freight Pony Bob will bring in there.

"Lone Star will camp for the balance of the night at Horseshoe Hill, and escort the wagon train on to the post tomorrow, and I may overtake you on my way coming back, for I intend to make up for lost time. Now I will be off!" and with a word to Captain Tom and Gentleman George, Buffalo Bill, again the pony express rider, was away on his long ride to Valley Farm.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE TWO BILLS.

Only a short distance had Buffalo Bill ridden when he heard, as he drew rein at a rugged part of the trail, hoof-falls coming rapidly behind him.

He at once drew into the shadow of a thicket, and was prepared for friend or foe.

A minute after a horseman came in sight, riding furiously, and as he was passing, Buffalo Bill called out:

"Ho, pard, what's your hurry?"

"Wait for pleasant company."

"I'll do it, for you are the company I am looking for, Bill," and Wild Bill drew rein and rode alongside of his pard.

"Were you going to keep up that clip all the way, Bill?"

"Until I found you—yes."

"Anything wrong?"

"No; only as you were going to Valley Farm, and I to the ranch, I left Lone Star in full command to push on and ride as far as the Pony trail with you, for it's a good fifteen miles from here."

"Yes, all of that, and I am more than glad of your company, not only because I know no better, but I would like to find out some things that are mysteries to me and I have not had time to talk about."

"Fire away, for I'm your target."

"In the first place, let me say that when I found the wagon trail, I followed it and discovered that it was being led into the Indian country.

"I was fortunate enough to find the guide out on ahead, and convinced all that he was wrong, so got the drop on him when he returned, bound him securely and bundled him into the rear wagon, from which he escaped by taking the chances and dropping out the end.

"I had already turned the train back for Horseshoe Hill, and when we got there we missed him.

"Of course the Indians picked him up, and he took chances on that or being eaten by wolves."

"He is an imp of Satan, Pard Bill."

"Yes, Satan himself."

"Well, I corralled the outfit at Horseshoe Hill, and when I saw something had

to be done I escaped by the river, met Lone Star and the men with him, and sending a rider each way, left another at Monument Rock, and so returned to run into the corral and help them out until help arrived.

"Of course I expected the men to drop in on the fight by twos and threes, and that you would come in good time with the pony riders, but what I wish to know is how the small army of riders, stable rangers, miners, settlers and stock-tenders happened there all at once and thus made such a grand victory of what looked very bad for us at one time?"

"But here we are at Horseshoe Hill, and the whole camp is awake, so we will just halt a minute and tell them the good news, and, Wild Bill, just look the other way when pretty Ada Starbuck turns her eyes upon you, for they are as dangerous as bullets, and she is going to be a fair rival to Little Sunbeam."

Wild Bill laughed in his cynical way, and the two pards rode up to Horseshoe Hill, where the whole camp turned out to meet them.

There were a dozen camp-fires burning brightly, and the train people had supper all ready for their defenders upon their return.

There was no need for the two men to say they must hasten on, and the outfit would be along in an hour and tell them all, for Ada Starbuck stepped to the heads of their horses, grasping a rein of each, and said in her sweet way:

"You say the victory has been won in two sharp fights, so it is not a case of life and death that demands your haste now."

"Get down and have some supper, for it is all ready, and the boys will give you fresh horses—two of mine—to ride on, for these are all tired out."

"Come, you are held up in true Western style, and by a girl—so hands up!"

"Call it feet down, Buffalo Bill, for I guess she's got the drop on us," said Wild Bill.

"So we drop," said Buffalo Bill, as the two dismounted.

They were at once given a basin and cool water to refresh themselves, then they sat down to a supper they could not but enjoy, and gave a slight account of the battles, saying that their losses had been light, and that of the Indians very heavy.

The horses, both fine animals, were ready for them by the time they had finished their supper, and promising that she should regain them at the ranch, they mounted and rode away, followed by the cheers of the women and children, Ada Starbuck setting the example and calling out:

"Three cheers for the two Knights of the Plains!"

"Well, Buffalo, your advice was good, and that little woman can be as dangerous to men with her eyes as a big Injun with a whole quiverful of poisoned arrows."

"I expected you'd get hit," said Buffalo Bill, and then he added:

"Now, Wild Bill, clear up this mystery for me of how over a hundred men came to the rescue within a few hours, and came, too, well prepared for business."

"I'll do it," said Wild Bill, greatly enjoying the cigar which Ada Starbuck had suddenly "sprung upon" each one after his supper.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A MYSTERY SOLVED BY A MYSTERY.

"I tell you what, pard, old man Captain Tom knows what a good cigar is, for I suppose Angel Ada raided his box for them," was the way Wild Bill began his story.

Buffalo Bill laughed, and replied:

"Angel Ada?"

"Well, that is a good one, and the name shall stick."

"Yes, Angel Ada goes, and I'll see that she is named on arrival at the ranch."

"These are good cigars, though, and I suppose they will make us swear off smoking those at the ranch."

"But I thought you were going to solve that mystery for me?"

"So I am; but do you know that girl is aware of what a good horse is also?"

"Indeed she does, and is as plucky as any man I ever saw."

"Why, she really seemed to enjoy the singing of the bullets and arrows about her."

"Do you know, she was so hospitable to us I was half expecting to see her spring a bottle on us, to revive our drooping souls."

"No, Bill, the bottle she had, and which I got a drink from before I escaped from the hill, was only half full, and she was ashamed to offer so little whiskey to two such knights as we are, having guessed at your capacity from seeing the thimbleful that I took."

"Well, half a bottle would have been better than no bottle."

"Was it good stuff?"

"As good for whisky as are these cigars in their line."

"I am glad she did not give me a drink, then."

"Why?"

"It would have caused me to swear off, and some day I might regret it."

"I thought I was to hear about the rescuers coming to our aid, and here we are at the ford."

"So we are."

"I'll tell you now," and after giving his horse a drink, in crossing the stream, and taking a few long pulls at his cigar, he said:

"You want to know about how our army was called into action?"

"Yes; I have been trying to find it out for some time."

"I am going to tell you."

"Life is short, Bill, you know."

"You know that Lone Star's band divided?"

"Yes, he told me of that, after they had gone to the old camp of the Cloven Hoofs."

"Devil Dan took his party to go over my trail, and while I was coming in on my run I was suddenly held up—"

"Held up?"

"Yes, by a stick in the trail, in the top of which was a split, and in that split a slip of paper."

"But it is a secret save between us two."

"When dawn comes you can read it, for I will turn it over to you, as I have been told to do."

"Meanwhile, I will tell you that it told me to ride with all speed to the ranch, calling one or more stock-tenders from each station, as they could be spared, and also to get all of the settlers, miners, and men about the ranch, as well as the Pony Riders' Patrol, and push with all speed for Monument Rock, then to follow a wagon trail which led up into the Indian country, where it was already arranged that it should be ambushed."

"The note went on to say that Gentleman George had also been warned to gather all the stock-tenders he could and await me at the Monument Rock."

"Then it said I was to hand the note to you, as you would know from whom it came, and added that you had gone on upon the trail of the wagon train and would meet the fate the people did unless help came."

"That was all that it said, Buffalo Bill."

"But enough."

"Yes, and though it flashed upon me at first that it was a plot to get the people away from the ranch and wipe it out, I then saw that the writing was by a woman's hand, and furthermore, it did say that not a word must be breathed to any one of how I got the warning."

"I then recalled how you had gotten your mysterious warnings of last fall, and I knew that there must be something in it, so I acted under my mysterious orders."

"Meeting Devil Dan and his men, I turned them back, sent one to the mines, another to the settlements, and then rushed on, leaving the stock-tenders to follow me."

"When I got in you were not there, of course, and that helped out the mysterious warning."

"I had a talk with Captain Starbuck,

showed him the paper in confidence, and the way he worked was a wonder.

"He called on the gunners of the cannon to get ready, had every man that could be spared in the saddle, and we were not over two hours in getting on the trail, and we rode for it, you may be sure.

"Where any of the horses failed us, we changed them at the stations, and then we met your messenger when not an hour's ride from Monument Rock.

"Arriving at the rock, we found Gentleman George and his stock-tenders, and after a short halt for dinner and rest, we pushed on.

"I knew the locality, after getting your message, so knew how to act, and divided my men in three parties, one to go to the ford, the other to attack the Indians on one side of the river, and the third to come on as a reserve.

"Well, you know the rest, and now the mystery of our coming is clear to you?"

"Yes, but there is a mystery yet for us to solve, Wild Bill," said Buffalo Bill, thoughtfully.

"What is that?"

"How that woman who warns us knows so much, who she is, and just why she is in this wild land."

"Count me in, pard, for though I am not of an over-curious nature, I should like to know."

"So should I, and I will," was Buffalo Bill's firm response.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE FLYING HORSEMAN.

The command under Lone Star returned to the Horseshoe Hill and went into camp there.

They brought their dead and wounded along, and as the doctor from the ranch had come with the men, he was soon busy, aided by the hospital steward, who accompanied the wagon train.

Women with tender hands also aided in caring for the wounded, while the dead were placed apart for burial on the morrow.

Those among the train people who had suffered the loss of a father, husband, brother or son, bore up well and would not allow their grief to cast a shadow upon the general joy at the victory won.

All realized that the wagon train people had been saved from a fearful fate, and that Buffalo Bill was the hero, with Wild Bill a strong second.

The welcome of the victors was a warm one, and the hungry and worn out fighters found a hearty supper awaiting them, and then, throwing themselves upon their blankets, sought to get what rest they could before daybreak.

After several hours of sleep the camp was astir, the men rose brightly, breakfast was cooked and the whole party assembled for the sad rites of burial of the dead.

Captain Tom Starbuck impressively read the service, Ada sang "Nearer, My God, to Thee," and men and women swelled the strains of the beautiful hymn into one mighty refrain, that rolled back in echoes from the cliffs across the stream and filled the air with melody.

One and all were deeply impressed by the sad scene, and tears stood in the eyes of strong men who had not had their hearts so moved since they were children, for the rich, superb voice of Ada Starbuck had made them feel and set many a hardened sinner to thinking of his past and of his coming end, for music will go deeper into the heart than any sermon, any studied words of the preacher.

Once the spell was broken, Ada was the first one to cast off the gloom and arouse all to work.

The train was to go on at once and under the escort of the pony riders, while Gentleman George and his stock-tenders moved away first to return to their posts, the stablemen followed on their way back to duty at the ranch, and the miners and the settlers were not far behind them, returning to their homes and work, and delighted that their numbers were to be increased by the addition of the train people.

Then came the wagon train under escort of Lone Star and the pony riders under his command, and, as the end of the long journey to find new homes was near at hand, the pace set was a good one, as it was thought best to make but one camp on the way to the ranch.

The prisoners were placed in the ambulance of Captain Tom, who, with Ada, took to the saddle, and black were the words of Burke Bradshaw at the treatment he received.

He had confidently expected that Buffalo Bill would order his release, but this was not done, only the gag being taken from his mouth.

Ada Starbuck herself took supper and breakfast to the two prisoners, but would hold no converse with them, but saw that they were not treated unkindly, save in being bound.

It was while the train was going into camp early in the evening, to get a good night's rest, and push on to the ranch the next day, that the rapid clatter of hoofs was heard coming along the trail, and far away a horseman appeared.

Larger and larger grew horse and rider and Lone Star called out:

"It is Buffalo Bill!"

"Come, all, and give him a cheer as he dashes by."

"But he will stop," said Ada Starbuck.

"Not he, for he is pony riding now, and he will go by like a flash," answered Lone Star.

Pony riders, and men, women and children of the train ran to the side of the trail, and every eye was upon the coming horseman.

He seemed literally to be flying along, his horse at his greatest speed, his neck stretched far out before him, and the rider seated easily in his saddle, his eyes on the trail ahead as from habit.

A moment more and the flying horseman was passing the camp and loud rang the cheers, hats were thrown in air, children screamed, the dogs barked, and Buffalo Bill had passed.

The pony rider was on duty again.

There was much disappointment among the people that Buffalo Bill had not halted, but Lone Star explained that a pony rider halted only for a change of horses and death when on his run, and several hours behind his time he was trying to make up all he could, for Wild Bill was then waiting at the ranch for him to come in with the Express which he was to carry on at the same break-neck pace.

CHAPTER XLV.

AGAIN ON THE PONY TRAIL.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill parted with each other at the Monument Rock, where they reached the pony trail.

"It was a good thing in you to follow that wagon trail, Buffalo Bill, and you have your reward in the result, as you saved the lives of all those people with the train."

"Yes, I feel quite well over it."

"Oh! I forgot to tell you that Captain Tom has some money for you."

"Money for me, Wild Bill?"

"Why, do you believe for a moment I would take—"

"Don't get scared, pard, it is money I won from that fresh chap, Burke Bradshaw."

"How is it mine?"

"Well, I have found it such safe betting on you that I have taken you into partnership with me in my winnings."

"Nonsense!"

"But what was the bet?"

"I bet that you would bring in the guide dead or alive."

"And Bradshaw bet that I would not?"

"Yes."

"Then you won; but what do you think of Bradshaw, Wild Bill?"

"That there is something wrong about his head; or he is an unmitigated villain."

"I confess I do not exactly understand his way, but I intend to study him in the future and wish you would do the same."

"I will; but didn't Little Lone Star put him into safe keeping quickly?"

"Yes, and trouble will follow yet, I fear."

"Now I want your opinion of Kit Kirby."

"Dead or alive?"

"The live one, of course, for the dead one is accounted for."

"Which one did we hang last fall?"

"That is what I should like to know."

"Ain't they as like as two Chinese?"

"They certainly are."

"But if we hanged Red Hand Kit Kirby, the Danite captain, who is this man?"

"Ask me something easy, William."

"This man claims to be Kit Kirby, and he is the very image of the one I knew at the fort as a soldier, and afterwards as the Danite."

"He speaks the Indian language as well as they do, knows this country thoroughly, and was going to lead that train to ruin."

"Now, the other Kit Kirby we know was an outlaw, one of the Cloven Hoof band, and he was as bad as they make them."

"Captain Starbuck, when in the army, knew Kit Kirby well, and recognized the other man as the renegade, the Danite and all else bad."

"And now he will have a chance to recognize this one."

"I tell you there is fun ahead at the ranch with this Kit Kirby, Burke Bradshaw and the arrival of the new settlers."

"And not forgetting Angel Ada, eh?"

"Right you are, pard; but here we part."

The friends grasped hands, put spurs to their horses, and went dashing away in opposite directions, Wild Bill eastward, Buffalo Bill westward.

Buffalo Bill held the pace to the next station, and had to call the one stock-tender left there out of his cabin, as he was not expecting a rider along, since the break had been made on schedule time.

But he soon had a horse ready, Buffalo Bill saying to him:

"Remember, have that horse ready for me on my return, for he has to be taken back to the ranch."

"All right, Buffalo Bill, and luck to you."

"Sorry you can't give me all the news, but I'll get it when my goods come back with Gentleman George."

Buffalo Bill waved his hand and was off, and he rode up to the next station just as day was dawning.

A solitary stock-tender had been left there also, and he was just coming out of his cabin as Buffalo Bill arrived.

But he quickly had a fresh mount ready, and like the other, had to wait for further news than could be told him in a minute.

Away went the pony rider on his next run to a station, and there, again, mounting a fresh horse, and declining the stock-tender's invitation to breakfast with him, he was away on the next and last stage of his long run.

He swept up to Valley Farm station to find Little Sunbeam standing at the gate of the stockade, rifle in hand, revolver buckled on, and her faithful dogs crouching near her.

"Oh! Buffalo Bill! I am so glad to see you!"

"But my father?" she cried, anxiously.

"Is safe and well, and will be here soon!"

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"And Pony Bob?"

"Came in this morning on foot. He arrived half an hour ago and has gone off to kill me a deer, as I was out of venison and did not wish to leave the station."

"He came in on foot, you say, Little Sunbeam?"

"Yes; some one shot his horse, four miles this side of the last station, but he rode on and escaped whoever was in ambush for him."

"His horse lasted half a mile, and from there on Pony Bob hoofed it, as he

said, and as the freight is heavy this run, and he carried his saddle and bridle, he had a hard walk of it. There! You hear his rifle, so he will soon be back.

"Come in and rest, for you look terribly haggard."

"And feel haggard. I will take a short rest, thank you," and Buffalo Bill threw himself down on a cot on the porch and was at once lost in slumber.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE MEETING AT VALLEY FARM.

Pony Bob came in soon, with a young deer slung on his shoulders, and Little Sunbeam met him out on the trail, her finger on her lips.

"Sh— Buffalo Bill is here! He has dropped off to sleep, for he is worn out and looks wretchedly."

"I should think so, for I'll bet he hasn't had any rest since he left the post, two days and nights ago."

"He is just that kind, Little Sunbeam."

"We'll let him sleep, and I'll help you get breakfast, and have all ready for him before we wake him."

"Don't let us hurry, then, so he can get a long nap."

"No, we must be square with him, or he won't forgive us. If he gets an hour's sleep it will do him, for he can do more sleeping in a short time than any man I ever met."

"Did he say what had been the trouble eastward?"

"He said father was all right, and all was well; also, that father would come soon; and then he hunted the cot on the porch as though he was half dead."

"Poor fellow!"

"He'll talk while he eats, for we pony riders have learned to do both together, well."

"Why, I can sing an Injun ballad, Miss Lena, with my mouth full to my teeth. I'll show you—"

"No, you won't, for I heard your attempt to sing an American ballad once with nothing in your mouth, not even the tune, and I draw the line at Indian music from every one."

"That settles it—I don't sing; but I can eat by note, so let us get at that breakfast, or I'll starve right here in the midst of plenty."

Sunbeam took the hint, and they went softly by the sleeping pony rider, Pony Bob remarking:

"He's too tired to snore."

"Nonsense! Men on the border train themselves to sleep quietly, I've heard, for fear of the Indians hearing them."

"That's so; but Bill was having a sweet dream."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him smile."

"Is that a sign?"

"Yes; of dreaming of you."

"If a baby smiles in its sleep it means that an angel is whispering sweet things in its little ear trumpet, and as Bill smiled when you passed, it shows that he felt the presence of an angel near and wished you were whispering sweet things in his ear."

"Pony Bob, I'll not give you a thing to eat if you talk as you do."

"Then I shall not open my mouth until breakfast time, after I have said you are the bravest little woman I ever knew, to stay here all alone, as you have done."

"Why, I had my dogs, my guns, the horses, poultry, and—"

"And yourself for company, and you couldn't have had better, for—"

"Pony Bob!"

"I'm dumb," and the pony rider hung up the deer he carried and began to clean it, the dogs eyeing him so wistfully that he made friends at once by giving them a liberal share.

Cutting off some good venison steaks, he took them into the kitchen, where Lena had breakfast well under way.

In less than an hour she said:

"You can call Buffalo Bill now, for breakfast is ready."

Buffalo Bill sprang to his feet at the first call, and was instantly wide awake.

"Ho, Bob, it is you? I'm glad to see you. I was completely used up, and must have slept several hours, I feel so rested."

"Just a little over an hour, Bill; but Miss Lena has breakfast, and I am anxious to be off, so we will feed, if you are ready."

"As soon as I have gotten the cobwebs out of my eyes," and Buffalo Bill soon freshened himself up with the cold spring water and was ready for Little Sunbeam's tempting breakfast.

The two pony riders did full justice to it, too, and when Buffalo Bill had briefly narrated all that had happened, Lena said:

"I am so glad to hear that other settlers are coming here, and, above all, a young girl like the one you describe Miss Starbuck as being."

"You will like her when you meet her, I know; but now, Bob, who was it that fired on you this morning?"

"Don't know, and was in too much of a hurry to stop and see."

"Outlaws, of course?"

"Well, I hardly think there was more than one, for only one shot came, and that was from a rifle some fifty feet away and aimed at my horse—not at me."

"Some day we may catch all these fellows that dog the Pony Riders' trail. What, have you finished?"

"Yes, am off at once, for I am just seven hours behind."

"Don't mention it, for I missed one trip, and am seven hours behind on the next."

"Anything of value?"

"Yes; I brought in a valuable pouch."

"And I have nothing for you; only came to make my run."

"Well, I'm off—good-by!" and Pony Bob went out, and, a moment after, was away on his run, while Buffalo Bill was taking matters more leisurely.

He seemed to wish to have a talk with Little Sunbeam, and so said:

"I've got something to tell you, Miss Lena, and I've got to talk fast."

"Come, sit down here on the porch, please."

CHAPTER XLVII.

A SECRET TO KEEP.

If Lena Ross expected a declaration of love from the earnest manner of Buffalo Bill, she could not have looked more innocent.

She quickly did as he asked her, and took a seat near him on the porch.

"Little Sunbeam, you remember a talk we had last fall?"

"About a certain mysterious and unknown woman who warned you of danger on the pony trail, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes."

"You said that she had confessed to having killed the king of the Cloven Hoofs, that she had told you she was going away, and would still remain a mystery, and directed you just how to find the retreat of the outlaws?"

"Yes, she did, and I told it to you as a secret."

"I have so regarded it."

"Even after that she appeared as my witness at the time I was tried for killing a pony rider who ambushed me, and everybody who saw her face thought surely it was you."

"I remember."

"Well, she is again out here, if, indeed, she had left the country at all."

"You mean it?" and Little Sunbeam started visibly.

"I do."

"You have seen her?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"On my last ride from here?"

"Where?"

"On the trail."

"Did she give you a warning?"

"Confidentially, I answer you, she did."

"By letter?"

"Yes, and—"

"And what?"

"Her warning saved my life."

"I will tell you about it," and Buffalo Bill told how he had escaped the trap by leaving his horse, and had captured the outlaws' horses.

"Buffalo Bill, you do bear a charmed life; but you were going to say something else awhile ago."

"Was I?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I guessed it."

"What was it?"

"I was going to say that I had met the mysterious unknown also."

"To talk to?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"The same day, a short while after I captured the outlaws' horses."

"Will you tell me of it, or can't you?"

"I will; but, remember, I am pledged to secrecy, so I pledge you to the same."

"You can trust me, even if I am a woman, for I am one who can keep a secret, I think."

"I believe you; but as this interests you, I will tell you."

"Interests me?"

"Let me tell you that I know, from your words and manner, that you know, or think you know, something about this fair mascot of the pony riders, my unknown and mysterious girl guide."

"Why do you call her fair?"

"Because she looks like you."

"You have seen her, then?" quickly asked Lena.

"Have you forgotten that I told you she appeared at my trial, and all supposed her to be you, in the glimpse they had of her face?"

"True, and you also told me that she was masked, or heavily veiled."

"She was when I met her on the trail."

"Tell me in what way you think I am interested?"

"As you showed interest in me before, I will now tell you that she did not kill the king of the Cloven Hoofs, as she had said, the bullet glancing on his skull, though she left him for dead."

"Finding out her mistake, she has returned here, and will again be the good angel of the pony riders; but she is as much a mystery as ever, and says she will not be as able to warn me as before."

"I asked her why she led such a life, and she said that it was her destiny."

"A strange destiny."

"Yes; like yours."

The shot told, for Lena Ross fairly started at the words, but said quickly:

"Was that all that she said?"

"No; for she asked about your father."

Again the girl started, and then said earnestly:

"Tell me all that she said, I beg of you."

"She asked first of your father."

"What of him?"

"She wished to know what I knew of Gentleman George."

"What did you tell her?"

"The truth."

"And that was—"

"That I knew nothing."

"Then?"

"She asked about you, and if you were alone on the trail much."

"Ah!"

"Fearing a sinister motive, I replied that you used to do so, as you hunted a great deal, but since the raids of the Cloven Hoofs your father kept you at home."

"Any more?"

"She said that she wished to see you, and some time she would do so."

"She said that, and I have told you, so that you may know just what to do."

"I thank you, Buffalo Bill, ever so much."

"Now I will not detain you, but when next you come, I will have a talk with you, for I am going to ask a favor of you."

"If I find that I cannot get a chance to see you here, I will pretend to go to my room, and will meet you on your way here, so do not shoot me if I hold you up a few hundred yards from the cabin."

"I certainly shall not. Good-by!" And Buffalo Bill was gone.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE ANGEL OF THE TRAIL.

As Buffalo Bill rode along on his return run he had food for thought.

Try as he might, he could not solve the mystery of the strange woman who had been such a friend to the pony riders.

Nor could he understand why such a man as George Ross had come out to the frontier to live the life he did, as a stock-tender, and had brought with him his beautiful daughter, who, young though she was, could have commanded admiration in metropolitan society.

There was some strange secret at the bottom of their coming, and the question in the mind of Buffalo Bill was as to whether it was the father's or the daughter's secret.

Then, too, he felt confident that the pony riders' mascot was in some way connected with the life of Gentleman George.

Why had such a woman as she come to these wilds and been content to dwell among outlaws?

Why had she attempted the life of the king of the Cloven Hoofs, and then disappeared, to reappear when she found that her bullet had not done its work of death as she had intended.

Dashing along at lightning speed, Buffalo Bill turned all these happenings over in his mind, yet he could get no nearer the truth than before.

As he was sweeping along, he saw ahead of him a party of horsemen.

Recognizing them at once as stock-tenders returning to their posts, he drew rein, well knowing that Gentleman George would be anxious about his daughter, having left her to go to his aid when he learned that he was with the wagon train guided into the Indian country.

The stock-tenders had dropped off at their stations, until only two remained with Gentleman George, and they were riding rapidly.

"Ah, Mr. Cody, you are making good time, and you are showing wonderful powers of endurance to stand what you have," said Gentleman George, anxious to know of his daughter's welfare, yet first seeking to find out how Buffalo Bill was standing his terrible strain.

"Oh, I am all right, thank you, Gentleman George, and I am glad to say I left Miss Lena well and contented, though anxious to see you.

"She gave Pony Bob and myself a breakfast we will not forget.

"I slackened up a minute to tell you of her."

"You are very kind; but let me tell you that human nature cannot stand what you are imposing upon yourself, and you must rest."

"I had an hour's sleep at your house, so am good for twenty-four hours more if need be; but I'll reach the ranch by night, and then I'll make up for lost time," and with a wave of the hand, Buffalo Bill was again going at full speed.

That he passed the wagon train in camp several hours after noon has been seen, but he would not tarry, as he was striving hard to make up for lost time.

On his return he had taken up Ada Starbuck's horse, and brought him one station nearer the ranch.

It was when he was within seven miles of the ranch that he saw the outline of a horse in a thicket on the right of the trail.

In an instant he was ready for action, and was glad to see that he could swerve from the trail just there and avoid a shot, if he was to be fired upon.

But the horse suddenly came to the edge of the thicket, and there was a rider upon his back.

At once Buffalo Bill replaced his revolver, and the next minute drew rein, and not ten feet from the horse and rider.

"Well, we again meet, Good Angel of the Pony Trail," and he raised his hat.

"Do not flatter me, for I do not deserve it," she said, earnestly.

"Pardon me, but you do, for I have more to thank you for now than ever before."

"Do not thank me. . .
"I hate thanks, and I know that you are grateful without your telling me.

"You accomplished wonders, and the result must have gladdened your heart, for you saved men, women and children from sure death."

"Tell me of it, for all I know was that you had followed the train, and that the Indians were prepared to entrap it.

"Then I acted through your friend, Wild Bill, and one other."

"Ah! I had not heard of that other one."

"No; it was through Gentleman George."

"You saw him, then?"

"No, I did not.

"I wrote a note, pretending it was from an outlaw who did not wish the massacre, and told him to go to the aid of the train and that you were with it."

"He told me nothing of this."

"I bade him keep secret the source of his information."

"Did his daughter know?"

"Not unless he told her."

"She said nothing of it to me."

"You saw her to-day?"

"Yes."

"What do you think of her?"

"She is one of the noblest of women."

"And what is your opinion of Gentleman George?"

"I regard him as highly as I do his daughter."

"Do you think they would forgive one who had gone wrong?"

"I believe it is their nature to be most forgiving."

"I will some day ask a favor of you, Buffalo Bill," said the veiled Angel of the Trail.

"And I will grant it with the greatest pleasure, for I owe you more than I can repay."

"Perhaps you can repay any debt you deem you owe me.

"But I will not detain you, so go on, only be ever on your guard, and when I can warn you I will."

She held out her small, gloved hand, the pony rider grasped it, and as she turned back into the thicket, he was again tearing along at full speed.

CHAPTER XLIX.

WILD BILL'S STORY.

The Stable Boy Rangers, the settlers, and the miners got into the ranch late in the afternoon, and Captain Starbuck and the few men left at the post were on hand to receive them, for Wild Bill had arrived early and had reported their coming.

Captain Starbuck had been a good deal disturbed at having nearly his whole force go off without any proof, as far as he could see, that there was a demand for them, but when he saw Wild Bill return he knew he would get the news.

Unmoved as Wild Bill was on all occasions, he could tell now that he had something of importance to tell, and he quickly led him to his quarters and called out to "Jane" to get the best breakfast the ranch could furnish for the returned pony rider.

"Well, Wild Bill, what is it all about, and was there need for all those men?"

"You bet there was, captain, and more, too."

"But when and where?"

"Some twenty miles beyond Monument Rock."

"Why did you not send me a messenger?"

"Well, Buffalo Bill was in command, and I guess he thought he couldn't spare a man, for men were worth their weight in gold just then."

"But what was it all about?"

"I'll tell you.

"Have you a cousin by the name of Thomas Starbuck?"

"Indeed I have, or had, for I have not heard of him for years; but he was a splendid fellow, and we were as devoted as brothers when we were boys.

"I went my way, and here I am, while he stuck to the East and made a large fortune.

"But what of him?"

"That is what it was all about."

"Indeed. I don't understand."

"Well, your cousin, Tom Starbuck, a widower with one child, a daughter, concluded he would come West and settle near you."

"Settle near me, out here—a man worth his millions?"

"As I understand it, he has lost his fortune, and, determining to come West, many of those who had worked for him in his mills and factories, decided to follow his fortunes and come with him.

"So they pooled their cash, got together, and started West.

"When they got to the terminus of the railroad they fitted out a train and pressed on, under a guide in whom they had perfect confidence.

"But he was the very double of Kit Kirby, so you may know that Satan ought not to hurt him."

"I should think not."

"Well, when Buffalo Bill got as far as Monument Rock on his last run, going west, he saw a wagon trail crossing the pony trail.

"Of course it could only go to destruction in that direction, so he followed, deserting the pony trail under the emergency of saving life, and—"

"He was perfectly right."

"Well, he took the chances of being right one way, if wrong the other, and he headed that train off, told them their guide was a fool or a villain, and made them put about.

"The guide was ahead, but came back, and Buffalo Bill held him up and made him a prisoner, for who do you think he was?"

"I cannot tell, unless it was the king of the Cloven Hoofs?"

"It was Kit Kirby."

"Impossible!"

"It was Kit Kirby, the Red Hand Dan-ite."

"You know that cannot be."

"Well, I thought so; but just wait until you see him.

"You saw him?"

"I did."

"But we hanged Kirby."

"Did we? Is the question.

"But he calls himself Kit Kirby, and his ghost would not be more like the man we hanged than he is."

"You amaze me."

"He amazed Buffalo Bill, but, Kit Kirby or his ghost, Cody held him up and made him a prisoner."

"Good!"

"He escaped in the retreat by dropping out of the rear end of the wagon, bound as he was.

"The Indians he was to meet were coming then after the train, and they picked him up, and he became aide-de-camp to the chief in attacking the train, which Buffalo Bill corralled on Horseshoe Hill.

"Finding that they could not hold out, Buffalo Bill made his escape at night, and just how your cousin will tell you, and he met Lone Star and his boys, and went back to the rescue.

"Well, they fought their way into the camp, and held on until our arrival, when Buffalo Bill took command, and we gave the Indians and their reinforcements a terrible whipping, stampeding them."

"Glorious!"

"Your cousin, Captain Tom, as they call him, was right in it, with thirty of his men, and it was a grand victory.

"But Buffalo Bill went out for a scalp that was not on an Indian's head, for he got sight of Kit Kirby and followed him.

"He ran him to the river in Valley Superb, and there caught him just at the ford.

"But you must hear the story of his fighting back the Indians while standing across his prisoner, whom he had not time to tie, for I enjoyed it, and I guess it was the worst half-hour of Bill's life.

"We went in search of him, found him in time, the whole command came on at a rush, and the Indians, having been reinforced, made a grand fight of it, but we whipped them worse than before, even with their increased numbers.

"Now, the pony riders under Lone Star

are escorting the train to the post; the other men will be along during the day, and to-morrow your cousin and his people will arrive, and they will bring two prisoners with them."

"Two?"

"Yes, Lone Star has Kit Kirby a prisoner, and the other one is your clerk, Burke Bradshaw!"

CHAPTER L.

THE CAPTAIN'S NERVE.

That the assertion of Wild Bill about Burke Bradshaw being a prisoner startled Captain Starbuck was shown by the latter's look of intense surprise.

He was a man who took matters calmly, but he certainly was excited when he looked at Wild Bill with flashing eyes and demanded:

"Who did you say was the second prisoner, Wild Bill?"

"Burke Bradshaw."

"My clerk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Little Lone Star has him a prisoner, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"By whose orders?"

"By his own act, sir."

"You know the circumstances?"

"Something of them."

"Tell them."

"I would prefer to have Buffalo Bill, who was in command, or Lone Star himself to explain, but as the former will not be here before the arrival of the prisoners, perhaps I will tell you what I know about the affair, as you request it, Captain Starbuck."

"I do, even more, I command it, for I fear there has been a sad mistake made in the case of Bradshaw."

"Don't judge, sir, before you know the circumstances."

"I was hasty."

"What are the circumstances?"

"Let me ask in what capacity Burke Bradshaw left here with the men?"

"As one of the men only."

"Nothing else?"

"Well, I recollect telling him that he must do all in his power to help, and serve as an aide-de-camp to you."

"He wanted to run the outfit the very moment he got on the field."

"He said that I was wrong in planning the attack on the Indians as I did, for he had been an army officer and knew the rules of warfare, as he had studied them."

"I told him we were not fighting by book, and I placed my men as I deemed best."

"Well, we got there with both feet, and as Buffalo Bill, with Lone Star and his squad, and Captain Tom with his people, dashed out and attacked the Indians we stampeded them."

"They met reinforcements a few miles away and rallied, and Buffalo Bill then took command to give them a pitched battle, and a better planned fight I never saw."

"But again Bradshaw came to the front, claimed that he was commander, gave orders, and Buffalo Bill had either to yield to his authority and follow his plans, which would have gotten a tremendous licking, or sit down on him hard."

"He did the latter and the men stuck to him."

"Well, we whipped them, but Buffalo Bill pursued the traitor guide, and the command fell upon me."

"Then there was another row, for Bradshaw again claimed authority, so I performed the sitting-upon-him act."

"When I went in search of Buffalo Bill with a few men, Lone Star, being next in rank, I turned the command over to him."

"Result, another row with Bradshaw."

"As you know, sir, Little Lone Star is no man to fool with, and when Bradshaw ordered the men to return to Horseshoe Hill and go into camp, and they were about to obey, for they were tired, sleepy and hungry, there was but one thing to do."

"Lone Star was equal to the emergency,

and he made Bradshaw understand who was in authority, for he not only bound him, but gagged him."

"Served him right, by Heaven!" shouted Captain Starbuck, for the first time interrupting Wild Bill.

"He had not long after this to prove he was right in remaining there, as I sent a messenger for the whole command, for they were wanted, and wanted bad."

"Buffalo Bill had chased Kirby and a chief through a small canyon in the foothills, and fired to kill the guide's horse."

"He did so, but the renegade cat lighted on his feet, sprang up behind the chief, who held back for him, and knowing the horse could not escape with double weight, he knifed the redskin and—"

"The imp of Hades!"

"He then rode on, sir."

"But Bill didn't stop, and finding the fellow could make the ford, he risked a shot at the horse and brought him down."

"That was right, he did not wish to cheat the gallows of the satan."

"He then had a race, a man on foot against a horse, and caught his man."

"Well, sir, it brought on the biggest fight with the Indians we had yet had, and if the men had returned to Horseshoe Hill all our work would have been useless, and many of us who went after Buffalo Bill would have been wiped out."

"But the fight crushed the Indians, and they will stay in their country now for a while, at least."

"When Buffalo Bill again took command, of course he did not undo Lone Star's work with Bradshaw."

"He was right."

"So Lone Star again took command as we left, and still has Bradshaw a prisoner, and will so turn him over to you."

"Well, he need expect no mercy from me."

"But let me tell you, Wild Bill, that Bradshaw owns considerable stock in the company."

"He is also closely allied to those who have full control, and he came here, I have understood from a secret source, to have a general eye over us."

"He is capable, and was an army officer out on the frontier, but was very wild and had to resign, or be dismissed."

"He did the latter, and his friends all thought that this was the place for him, and he is to be general inspector, I learn, so that means that I will be fired, and Buffalo Bill, yourself and Lone Star also; but while I have charge I will run things my way, and I have the nerve to punish Mr. Burke Bradshaw for this interference with those in command."

"You bet you have nerve, and will do it," muttered Wild Bill.

CHAPTER LI.

PROPHESYING TROUBLE.

Buffalo Bill came in at the same terrific pace for which he was noted as a Pony Express rider.

Ever merciful to a horse, and devoting to his splendid animals all the care that could be bestowed upon them, when on duty he never spared either himself or them.

Their run was a fast one, though not a very long one or an overtax upon them; but they knew their rider and made it without urging and with their greatest speed.

When he ranged up at the post Captain Starbuck was the first to grasp his hand, and he said:

"Welcome back, Buffalo Bill, and let me tell you I feared you were gone this time sure, when you did not return on time for your run."

"No, sir; I found something to look after I deemed more important than had I carried any amount of money, for money can be restored, human life, never."

"You did just right, and, fortunately, there was nothing of value going either way just then."

"I have reported to the company that the trail was blocked by Indians, and the whole force had been put on to clear it, and under your command."

"But you have a big debt of gratitude due you from me in saving my cousin, Tom Starbuck, and his daughter—what did you say her name was, Wild Bill?"

"Wild Bill has named her Angel Ada, sir, and I will say frankly that she deserves it, for she is as plucky as the devil—I beg pardon, as it is proper for one who wears petticoats to be."

"She is a fair match for Little Sunbeam, Captain Starbuck, and your brother, his lovely daughter and the people with him, will be a great addition to your settlement—hold on, Wild Bill, for I have a word to say to you," and stepping up to his pard as he was ready to mount, he said, in a low tone:

"I saw our mascot, and she gives warning that the Cloven Hoofs are after us again, so be very careful."

"I will, old fellow, and take some of that advice to yourself."

"Ready, sir!" and Wild Bill turned to Captain Starbuck, who sang out in professional tones:

"Go!"

With a leap Wild Bill was in the saddle, the horse tearing along before he was well seated, and in a few minutes there was only a long vail of dust left suspended over the trail to show where the flying pony rider had passed along.

"Now, Bill, come in to supper, and then you must go to bed, for you really show that you need rest, and I don't wonder, after all you have gone through."

"As my servant, Black Diamond, is back with the outfit, sir, I will be glad to breakfast with you," answered Buffalo Bill, and Captain Starbuck rejoined, with a smile:

"It is my supper, but as you are due in the morning you take it as your first meal and call it breakfast."

"Let me see. On this run you are just six hours behind. Not bad, indeed, considering that you have accomplished wonders."

"Counting the other runs, I am two days and a half behind, captain," and Buffalo Bill smiled.

"We do not count them, for the wheels of the Pony Express machine were clogged for two days."

"Now let me tell you that I have heard the whole story of your splendid work, and I congratulate you and those under your command."

"But there is one thing that I wish you to tell me, and that is just what occurred with Burke Bradshaw."

"I will, sir, but I suppose you know that he struck a snag when he ran up against the man from Texas."

Captain Starbuck laughed and said:

"Yes, he made a sad mistake as far as his own comfort was concerned."

"I can understand that you and Wild Bill tempered with him, but Lone Star is not one to stand nonsense in any one, and he would not hesitate to place me under arrest if he thought I was interfering with his duty when he had full control."

"It completely dazed Bradshaw, sir, but he is not the man to forgive or forget, and he will show fight."

"I do not doubt it, but let me tell you that I shall keep him a prisoner until to-morrow night, when he shall be tried for his acts of disobedience in the face of an enemy."

"I am glad to hear you say this, sir, on Lone Star's account, for it will show the men that you spare no one, and all seem to expect you fear to punish Bradshaw and will dismiss Lone Star for what he did, but Wild Bill and I deemed differently."

"You two know me, the men do not."

"Bradshaw shall be punished, and as soon as he gets his way then I will be the under dog in the fight, for he'll have his revenge against me, you, Wild Bill and Lone Star."

"Now go to your cabin and get the rest nature demands."

CHAPTER LII.
AGAIN ON TIME.

As Buffalo Bill would have to start out at noon the next day, Captain Starbuck decided to take his testimony before witnesses of the affair with Burke Bradshaw.

So the next morning, when Buffalo Bill appeared at breakfast, thoroughly refreshed by his long night's sleep, the two had a talk together during the meal which "Jane" had been particularly desirous of making a tempting one.

"You have wonderful recuperative powers, Buffalo Bill, for you look as fresh as can be this morning."

"I put in just ten hours of gilt-edged sleep, captain; then, cold as it was, jumped into the creek, and I feel like new-mown hay."

"Well, now I wish your statement regarding Burke Bradshaw, and Jane and two of the stablemen will witness what you say, so I can use it at the trial to-morrow."

The stablemen were called by Jane, and Buffalo Bill gave his statement of how Burke Bradshaw had tried to usurp authority and all that was said and done.

Then he went to his quarters and looked over his weapons, and got ready for his long run westward again.

Having had dinner with Captain Starbuck, it was just the time exactly for Wild Bill's coming, when he was seen approaching at a rapid pace.

"Didn't see the photograph of a Cloven Hoof this run, captain," cried Wild Bill, as he threw himself from the saddle, and he added, in a low tone:

"Valuable freight, this time, sir."

"Yes, Cody!"

"Here, sir."

"The freight is valuable this time—money—a package of diamonds going through to Frisco, and some important legal papers."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Are you ready?"

"All ready, sir."

"Keep a watchful eye, and take no chances. Go!"

The pony rider was in the saddle at a bound, the stablemen each side of the restive horse sprang aside, and he went off like an arrow from a bow, amid a loud cheer from the gathered crowd.

"I do hope he'll go through unmolested this run, Wild Bill," said Captain Starbuck, looking after the rapidly diminishing pony rider.

"He'll make it, and if the Cloven Hoofs get the booty, they'll get his life with it, and man can't do more than die for a cause."

"True, it is more than any one could ask than to risk life."

"But I am going now to meet the wagon train, as my work is done for this afternoon, and I am anxious to welcome my cousin."

"May I accompany you, sir?"

"Certainly, if you wish I will be glad to have you; but you have not had your dinner, and must be tired."

"I am not tired, sir, and it will take me just ten minutes to surround my dinner," and Wild Bill hurried over to Headquarters, where Jane had dinner ready for him, as both he and Buffalo Bill had been invited to eat with Captain Starbuck until Black Diamond's return to look after them.

The dinner was quickly "surrounded," and then Wild Bill "spruced up" his toilet and was mounted upon his best horse, saddle and bridle, by the time Captain Starbuck was ready, for he did not ride the pony saddles except in riding Express.

The two then rode away together to meet Captain Tom's train, and its escort of pony riders under Lone Star.

The train meanwhile was approaching at a good pace, when, about half a dozen miles from the post, a chorus of voices shouted:

"There he comes!"

"Who?" was asked in chorus by the train people.

"The pony rider!"

"Who is it?" Ada Starbuck asked, as she rode toward the front.

"Buffalo Bill!"

A mere dark speck he had appeared at first far down the trail, and rapidly growing larger and larger, it looked like a rolling ball trailing a vail of clouds behind it.

Then the outlines of horse and rider were seen, next came the clatter of hoofs, then a splendid steed, with rider upright, flying along, and with a wave of the hat he had passed amid a series of wild cheers.

"What an exciting life you pony riders lead!" cried Ada Starbuck, with flushed face, which showed her excitement, while a perfect babel of voices came from the train people.

"Yes, miss, we do, and the one that just went by gets more excitement out of it than any of us."

"He's a dandy, and if there is not some little angel sitting up aloft on a damp cloud watching over his life I am greatly mistaken, for it seems nothing can down him."

"And I hear you are one who has had many escapes, too," said Ada.

"Oh, I'm so small they can't hit me," was the laughing reply.

"You never impressed me with being a small man."

"You are not a large woman, miss, and I have only an inch the better of you in height," and certainly in the saddle Little Lone Star was a striking-looking figure, so splendidly did he ride.

"It is not a man's size, or a woman's, but the heart that tells," Ada said, and then added:

"I had heard so much of you pony riders, and that you were a wild, desperate lot of men, to fear rather than be friendly with, and I find you all a noble lot of men, brave to recklessness, generous, noble-hearted, and as gentle as kittens, but terrible in battle."

"Look at Buffalo Bill! He is a courtier, handsome as a picture, and his manners are almost womanly, so gentle are they, while Wild Bill, though of a sterner type, is a man to command admiration and respect."

"No; I am in love with the whole pony rider band, present company always excepted," and she smiled wickedly at Lone Star, who said, earnestly:

"Now, I would like to have it just the reverse of the exception; but I expect you will see Captain Nat Starbuck soon."

"You think he will come to meet us?"

"Yes, now that he has finished his duty, for he could not leave until he made the transfer of the pouches, you know."

"I shall be most glad to see him."

"Suppose we call father, and ride on ahead."

"Certainly." And the three had gotten some half a mile ahead of the train, when they saw two horsemen approaching.

CHAPTER LIII.
THE MEETING.

The two horsemen were at once recognized by Lone Star as Captain Nat Starbuck and Wild Bill, and he dropped back as the two men, so long separated, met each other, Wild Bill doing the same.

Then Captain Nat greeted Ada most cordially, Wild Bill then saying:

"We have named her Angel Ada, Captain Starbuck."

"A name that Buffalo Bill says fits her," Captain Nat replied.

"Yes, she's all the name implies, save the wings and the damp clouds," put in Lone Star, in a low tone, but the words were heard and Ada replied:

"Well, I neither want the wings nor the clouds, for I am earthly just now, and I can do all my hovering around on the back of a good horse, Uncle Nat, for I am going to call you uncle, for that will make you a second father to me."

"But first let me tell you that I think you have the grandest, bravest, best set of men under your command I ever saw, and father will back me up in all I say of them."

"Yes, Nat, we owe life and all to your brave pony riders, and the gallant fellows who came with them."

"We will never forget them, and they will ever be welcome to come to my house, for I intend to settle here."

"You become a wild Westerner?"

"Oh, yes; I'm going to establish an Eden for this angel of mine."

"I am sorry you are forced to do so, though delighted to have you here."

"Well, it was a case of too much friendship."

"I couldn't say no, indorsed for friends, and then came the crash."

"I could not live poor where I had lived as a prince among men, and my brave girl said the same, so we gathered up the fragments that remained from the wreck, a few thousands of dollars, and came here."

"We have a complete outfit for a home along, a few thousands in bank, and we do not intend to mope, but be happy in our new life."

"That is all there is about it, Nat."

"Tom, you are a brave fellow, and the girl is worthy of you."

"I have a large ranch up the valley, and a cabin nearly finished, so you can live with me until it is ready, and we will go there and work it together, for I expect I will be ousted, as Lone Star here has made a prisoner of a very important personage in the company, but one who did not let it be known just who and what he is."

"It mattered not to me, sir, who or what he was, so long as he was trying to have the men rebel against my authority."

"You did right, Lone Star."

"Now, Tom, let me meet the good people who have followed your fortunes to the land of the setting sun."

The train had now come up, and when the pony riders had given their chief three cheers, Captain Tom took him among the people and presented them to him.

"I have prepared for your coming, good people, for we have several vacant cabins to house you in until you can establish yourselves in your own homes, and you are more than welcome, I assure you."

"Push on well, for I wish you to get comfortably settled before nightfall, and it is a short five miles to your new homes."

These words were greeted with a cheer by the people, and Captain Starbuck was turning away to ride on ahead with Captain Tom, Ada, and Wild Bill, when a voice called out:

"Are you aware, Captain Starbuck, that I am with this train?"

"Ah, Bradshaw, it is you, is it?"

"It is, and bound like a criminal."

"Release me at once!"

"Pardon me, but you are the prisoner of Lone Star, who is in command, and has charges to prefer against you."

"If true, and you shall be tried to-night, I will then act."

"Do you dare refuse to release me?" yelled Bradshaw.

"You will find that I dare do what I deem right always, Mr. Bradshaw."

"Release me at once, or you will suffer for it."

"I neither fear you or your threats."

"When your case has been tried, you will be set free, or not, as I may decide."

In vain did Bradshaw rave, for Captain Starbuck turned away, and as the man then began to swear before the women and children, Kit Kirby joining him with evident relish in his profanity, Lone Star called to four of his men, and ordered:

"Two of you each gag those prisoners!"

This silenced the two men very quickly, and the pony riders looked to Lone Star, who said sternly:

"You heard my orders—obey me!"

The prisoners were quickly bound, and the train moved on once more, Captain Starbuck, his cousin, Ada, and Wild Bill riding on ahead, and the former saying:

"Lone Star stands no nonsense!"

CHAPTER LIV.
THE ACCUSED.

Captain Starbuck had already fitted up for the reception of his brother and Ada, the latter being given the best room in the cabin.

There were some cabins up the valley

which had been put in order for the people, and Lone Star had been told to guide the train there.

Then the two kinsmen sat down for a long talk together, while Ada set about making herself comfortable.

The ambulance and three Starbuck wagons soon arrived, and while they halted at the post the others moved on a mile further up the valley.

It did not take Ada long to make her room the most cheery in the cabin, by unpacking her things, and she expressed herself as glad to get out of a riding habit and into a dress more suitable.

She had already interviewed "Jane," and she helped in preparing supper, and, her uncle, as she insisted upon calling him, remarked:

"The place looks different with the sunshine of your presence in it, Ada."

The two prisoners had been taken to the lock-up and a guard of two men detailed to remain there on watch.

Lone Star had ordered them untied and the gags taken from their mouths upon their arrival at the lock-up, and they looked at him as though they would like to express their opinion, but wisely refrained from doing so.

A messenger had been sent the rounds of the post, and another to the settlement and the mining camp to give notice of the trial to be held that night, for Captain Starbuck determined to at once try Burke Bradshaw and either punish him or set him free.

Just what he would do he had not yet determined, for, a just man, he wished to hear the prisoner's story, though he did not for a moment doubt the charges against him.

As Black Diamond had returned, Wild Bill took supper at his cabin, and invited Lone Star to join him.

The two had a long talk over the coming trial, and when the time came they went down to Headquarters.

Captain Starbuck was in his judicial chair, and his brother sat on one side of him, while there were present also Ada and half a dozen women from the train and as many more from the settlement.

Nearly all of the men of the train were there, besides pony riders, stablemen, settlers and miners, the room being crowded.

The prisoner to be tried first was Burke Bradshaw, and he was brought in by two pony riders and placed before his judge and accusers.

He looked savagely at Captain Starbuck, and said, firmly:

"Starbuck, what mockery is this to attempt to try me.

"I will not submit to it."

"Prisoner, the law here is vested in me, and all here at this post come within my jurisdiction, you being no exception.

"You are charged with a very serious offense, and I intend to investigate it thoroughly for and against you.

"If you behave yourself you can remain as you are, but if I have trouble and insolence from you I shall put you in irons and gag you during your trial.

"I shall hear your accusers, examine witnesses, and then shall listen to your story and decide when I have heard all as to your innocence or guilt, and if the latter is the verdict you shall soon know what your punishment shall be, so do not make it worse for yourself by your behavior here."

The prisoner turned pale and seemed to for the first time realize his position.

He saw, too, that bravado and insolence would not help his cause, and he said, quietly:

"I submit because I am compelled to, one man against many."

"You are wise.

"I shall select as your jury of six men those who were not with the command, but here, so that they know nothing of the affair.

"Is there a miner here who was not in the field?"

Two arose.

"I appoint you both—come forward and write down your names.

"Is there a settler here who was not in the field?"

Five men arose.

"I accept two of you—you, Noonan and Walker.

"Come and put down your names.

"Now, from among the stablemen I appoint Burt Simpson and Sawyer, taking no one from the pony riders, as the prisoner is accused by the officers of the Pony Riders' Patrol.

"The jury will take their seats, and I will read the accusation of Buffalo Bill as written down and sworn to." And Captain Starbuck then began the testimony of Buffalo Bill against the prisoner.

CHAPTER LV.

THE TRIAL.

All listened attentively to the charge of Buffalo Bill that the prisoner, Burke Bradshaw, had deliberately attempted to usurp the authority invested in him as commander of the Pony Riders' Patrol, and had defied the laws that govern the band, acting in a most reprehensible manner in the presence of an enemy and at a time when common safety demanded that they should all stand together against a most dangerous foe.

"What have you to say to this charge, prisoner?"

"My name is Bradshaw, sir."

"You appear here as a prisoner, and so I address you.

"Answer my question."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Then I accept your guilt as proven, and shall sentence you to punishment."

"You dare not punish me."

"Beware, for you tread on dangerous ground, and men out here are sentenced to death for less crimes than you have been accused of.

"I ask you again what answer have you to make to Buffalo Bill's charges?"

The man again paled, for he, too, knew that he might go too far.

"I say this in answer, that I am a stockholder in the company, I am here as a clerk, because it was my desire to so appear, but in reality I have full control and you are under my authority as well as the others, so, of course, not wishing to be murdered by mismanagement, I decided to assume command."

"You were booked to me as clerk only, though I learned that you were financially interested in the company, and more, that you had great influence at headquarters.

"Still as clerk you came here, and in that capacity only have you served since being here.

"As such you have done your work well, and you went with the command simply as any other man went who was not an officer.

"Now, Wild Bill, take the stand, for I wish to have the testimony of my three officers, and then of the witnesses to the conduct of the prisoner, to see to just what limit he went."

Wild Bill glanced quietly over the faces and said, in his peculiar way:

"When we got near to where the train was corralled, and I was planning the advance and attack, the prisoner just chipped in and tried to bluff me into giving him command."

"I refused, not being a born fool, and attacked as I deemed best, and so the redskins are not now enjoying a scalp dance at our expense.

"I was tempted to shoot him, for that was no time to quarrel, and I'm almost sorry I did not, for a man who would do what he did was either a traitor to his own people, or should be turned over to the fool killer.

"When our forces united Buffalo Bill was captain and that relieved me of the double responsibility of fighting Indians and watching a man I feared would get us into trouble."

"Do you accuse me of being a traitor?" cried Burke Bradshaw.

"The prisoner will keep silence until called upon to speak," said Captain Starbuck, while Wild Bill remarked, indifferently:

"I do not mind answering him, sir. Yes, you are either a traitor or a fool to behave as you did; take your choice," and Wild Bill resumed his seat.

"Lone Star, you are the next witness."

Lone Star took the stand and Captain Starbuck said:

"I wish your statement of the prisoner's behavior when you were in command of the forces protecting the Starbuck wagon train."

In a few words Lone Star told his story, and it was to be seen that he held the same opinion as Wild Bill, that a man who raised a contention in a moment of so much peril to all was either a fool or wished to see the command defeated because he was not given the leadership.

"There will come a reckoning for these insults," fairly hissed Bradshaw, but Lone Star paid no attention to the threat.

Then Captain Tom was called and he said that while he had no right to accuse the prisoner of treachery, he certainly thought that his claim to become the commander had endangered the whole party, and that the plan of Wild Bill's attack, the battle under the leadership of Buffalo Bill, the ride to the rescue when Lone Star led, had all been well carried out, and if differently done would have resulted in defeat.

Then he added that all had seemed to feel a relief when Lone Star had mastered the situation by placing Bradshaw under arrest.

Other witnesses to the trouble between the three pony rider officers all testified that Burke Bradshaw was the instigator of the trouble in each instance, and when he had heard all that was to be said against the man, Captain Starbuck said:

"Prisoner, you can now plead your case."

CHAPTER LVI.

THE VERDICT.

"I have this to say, not in my defense, for this alleged trial is a mockery of the law, but to show you that I had a right to take command of the men when I saw them led by men who were risking the company's valuable property as they were," and Burke Bradshaw looked around as though he had made a decided hit, while Captain Starbuck asked:

"To what property of the company do you refer, for the men are not the slaves of the company, surely?"

"To the horses and equipments, the guns and small arms."

"Let me correct you then by saying that the guns were captured from the Mormons some years ago by me, and hidden in the mountains until needed."

"On the expedition, every man rode his own horse, and was armed with his personal weapons, the ammunition alone being taken from the company's ordnance stores."

"I did not know that."

"It is, nevertheless, true."

"I feared a massacre would occur, under irresponsible leadership, and all would be lost, hence I sought to assume control."

"Have you no other defense?"

"I need no other, for I am here as the real manager of the company's affairs—the commander of the post, in fact."

"What proof have you of this?"

"My word."

"It is not sufficient now, and as you certainly have no authority here other than as a clerk, I will let the jury decide as to the verdict in your case."

"Gentlemen, you have heard all that has been said in this case, and the prisoner's defense, so I ask you for your verdict."

"Guilty of conduct I regard as criminal under the circumstances," said one of the jury.

"Guilty of disobedience of orders from his commander," answered Number Two.

"Guilty of rebellion."

"Guilty of striving to cause an outbreak against the commander."

"Guilty of inciting rebellion."

"Guilty as accused."

Thus the six men rendered their verdict, and the loud applause in the room, which Captain Starbuck in vain tried to

check, showed Burke Bradshaw that it was the verdict of all.

He was very pale, and bit his lips viciously, while Captain Starbuck said:

"You have heard the verdict, prisoner; what have you to say that sentence should not be passed upon you?"

"What sentence would you dare put upon me?" cried Bradshaw, but his face changed at the roar of voices uttering one word ere Captain Starbuck could reply:

"Death!"

"You have heard how your comrades feel; but I will be more merciful, and simply sentence you to imprisonment in the lockup of the post for sixty days."

"Hang him!"

"Shoot him!"

"That is child's play, and no punishment!"

The cries were becoming more furious when Captain Starbuck arose and ordered, in a way that the men knew he meant it, that perfect silence should be given him.

At once the crowd obeyed, and turning to the prisoner, who was now excited, he said:

"You called to me just now that you had something to say."

"I will hear it."

"I wish to say that I have here the proofs that I came here as general manager, if I so choose to take the position; if not, to continue in the office as clerk as long as I saw fit to remain."

"I was not to displace you, Captain Starbuck, for the company has the utmost confidence in you and your management, but, to be frank, I was to hold one office for a purpose, while engaged in other work."

"As my usefulness in such work as I refer to is now destroyed, I will tell you that I will leave the post and report to the company headquarters the result of my coming."

"You say that you have proof that you came here as other than a clerk?"

"I have."

"I must see your proof."

"I would prefer not to show it."

"Then the sentence stands against you."

"It will destroy my usefulness in the future."

"That has already been destroyed."

"Will you not take my word?"

"Backed up by no proof, I will not."

"You received the letter saying that I was to be clerk—that my duties were to be light, and my time pretty much my own, while I was to be shown every consideration and given what aid I required?"

"Yes; I have that letter filed away."

"Is that not sufficient?"

"No, for it gives you no direct authority such as you claim and tried to usurp without producing your proof that you had the right to do as you attempted."

"Very well; upon your head be it if I have to publicly betray a company's secret to protect myself."

"Upon my head be it, for I accept all responsibility," was the plucky response of Captain Starbuck.

CHAPTER LVII.

LIKE A BOMBSHELL.

All eyes turned from Captain Starbuck to the prisoner, to see how the words of the former would impress him.

The crowd was no longer demonstrative, some being awed by Captain Starbuck's look at their outbreak, others appearing to believe, from Burke Bradshaw's manner and words, that he was holding something in reserve to spring upon them.

He surely would not trifle thus, they thought, without other proof than his word that he had a right to do as he claimed.

The hotheads, in regarding the captain's sentence more calmly, felt that he could not do more than inflict an ordinary punishment upon one who stood so well at the company's headquarters, who owned stock in the affair, and had been sent there at least to hold a position, all of which went to prove that he could not be what Wild Bill and Lone Star had openly asserted, a traitor, for it would be against his own interest.

Seeing that he was expected to speak, Burke Bradshaw, amid a silence that could

be felt, took a leather wallet from his pocket, opened it, and unfolded an official-looking document.

He also drew out of the large wallet a gold badge, massive and elegant in workmanship.

He then also drew out a large envelope, which was addressed, and with a strange look upon his face, said:

"This letter is addressed to you, but it was left to me whether I gave it to you or not."

Then he pinned on his left breast the gold badge, the engraving on which no one was able to see, and continued:

"As you force me to say why you have no right to try me, and that I have a right to command here, I wish you to hear this letter, all of you, which I will read aloud, and I will then give you still further proof."

"Shall I read it, sir, or do you withdraw the sentence?"

"The letter is addressed to me?"

"Yes."

"Then give it to me."

"Pardon me, but it is written here:

"To be delivered only at the option of the one herein named."

"And you do not care to deliver it to me?"

"No; nor to read it; but you will force me to do so, unless you now retract!"

"I do not retract! Read it!" was the captain's stern response.

"I will do so," and there was a peculiar smile upon the face of the prisoner.

Taking the letter slowly from the envelope, he read, in a distinct voice, and in which there was a ring of triumph, while all in the room heard him:

"Nathaniel Starbuck, Esq.,

"Manager Utah Division,

"Overland Pony Express Co.

"Sir—The bearer of this letter, introduced to you by a letter forwarded some days ago as one to take the situation as clerk under you, at your post, I will now present to you in his real character, but confidentially, as Captain Burke Bradshaw, the Chief of our Secret Service Corps."

He paused for a sensation, and was rewarded, for a hum went over the room, and strange looks passed from one to the other.

Even Captain Nat Starbuck's calm face showed surprise.

Lone Star, however, had a smile of incredulity on his handsome countenance, while Wild Bill wore the cynical smile natural to him.

The men present, many of them, were awed, for a detective in their midst was enough to frighten some who came away from their homes under a cloud.

At last the captain spoke:

"We have digested what you have thus far read, sir, so await the balance of the letter."

"You shall have it," answered Bradshaw, with a smile of triumph, and he continued to read in the same distinct, impressive voice:

"Captain Bradshaw goes to your division on a most important work of a confidential nature, and he will remain there, or at the other divisions, until it is accomplished."

"You will furnish him with all the aid he may demand of you, and if he has to call out a force of men from the post he will have full control of them as their chief, and they are to obey him as such."

"In his capacity as clerk he will be attending to the secret work that carries him west; and he has full power to make all changes he may deem proper, so regard him as one in full authority."

"Captain Bradshaw may explain matters to you I do not write of here, at his option."

"Very respectfully yours,

"ALEX. MAJORS,

"Manager O. P. Ex. Co."

Again Burke Bradshaw cast the triumphant look about the room amid breathless silence, and then said:

"Now you know who and what I am, may I ask what you think of your testimony?"

"As you are looking at me as though for an answer, I'll tell you flat-footed, Captain Burke Bradshaw, that a man carrying the papers you have, not making them known, yet expecting people to know of your great importance, and also acting as you did, without showing your authority, is either a blamed fool or wished to make trouble, as you have done," was Wild Bill's stinging reply.

CHAPTER LVIII.

ANOTHER SURPRISE.

Wild Bill's words broke the spell of awe the crowd felt, for he showed how little he cared for the mighty detective.

Burke Bradshaw looked at him as though he wished to spring upon him, but wisely forebore from doing so.

In the same supercilious manner that he had shown throughout, he then turned to Captain Starbuck and said:

"I hand you this letter now, Judge Starbuck."

"I also wish you to read over these official commissions of my authority as United States Secret Service official, special detective, and Chief of the Overland Corps of Detectives. They may edify even you and convince you that you have no authority to punish me, for if I did not make myself known, as that fellow there asserts, it was for reasons I considered sufficiently important for not doing so."

"We are not all mind-readers out here, so we could not see your authority in your face," retorted Wild Bill.

"Well, there is one thing more—this badge of office I have pinned on my breast."

"Now, am I free, Judge Starbuck?" and the look upon the man's face was most insulting.

Though wishing to resent his words and manner, Captain Starbuck simply replied:

"Your authority, Captain Bradshaw, is beyond mine, so I have no right to hold you for punishment."

"But I have, and will!"

It was Little Lone Star who uttered the words that startled all, and he sprang in front of the detective captain, a revolver covering him, and then continued:

"I hold you, Brandt Bentley, alias Marcus Mexton, alias Rupert Ramsey, alias Burke Bradshaw, as a bank defaulter, forger counterfeiter, confidence man, a burglar and a murderer."

"You are my prisoner, for, while detective papers are being shown, I will show mine!" and with a quickness and strength that were remarkable, Little Lone Star seized the man he accused of such terrible crimes, and, in an instant, had clasped upon his wrists a pair of steel handcuffs.

With a moan the accused sank back into a seat, his face the hue of death, his eyes glaring, but seemingly unable to utter a word.

The words and act of Lone Star had been so rapid that the crowd hardly knew what was taking place until it was over, even Wild Bill betraying surprise.

Then Lone Star wheeled toward Captain Starbuck, and said, with no show of excitement:

"Sir, as it seems the proper thing to show authority, allow me, in asking pardon for breaking in upon your court of border justice, to tell you that I am Homer Harkaway, a United States detective, and I have all papers to prove my words."

"For four years I have been on the track of that man, having been specially detailed for the service by the chief of the Secret Service at Washington."

He made a Government criminal of himself by robbing a National Bank, counterfeiting United States money, and robbing the mails, hence my being put upon his track."

"I am a Texan, yes, and was a Texas ranger, so there I learned to ride, to trail, and a little about fighting Indians and desperadoes."

"I have a ranch in Texas, and am in good circumstances, so follow my present calling from a fondness for it."

"But now to this man:

"I have tracked him over the entire United States, and also to Mexico, South America, and Europe!"

"I have given you several of his aliases, but he has a dozen more, even having figured as a French count and a Mexican don."

"He is one of the cleverest criminals in the world, and eluded me by his cunning and expertness in disguises, while he speaks several languages and is a perfect actor."

"You have seen him only in one character."

"Last fall the Overland Pony Express Company decided to send its chief detective on special duty over the line to hunt down certain crooks who were operating upon it."

"They, the managers of the company, suspect that the real Captain Bradshaw is at this post, attending to the duties he started upon; but I know, sir, that Captain Burke Bradshaw, the Overland detective, lies in his grave."

"He met, on his way out, one who interested him greatly—one who professed also to be a detective, chief of the Texas force, and the two became fast friends."

"But it was a plot of the pretended detective, who killed Captain Bradshaw, whom, through a striking coincidence, he resembled to a remarkable degree."

"He buried him quietly in a little village, and with his papers came on here as Burke Bradshaw."

"I had come up here on the Overland, having lost my man, and knowing that he had a brother who had come West and turned outlaw."

"I expected, as I had hunted him so hard, to find him with or near his outlaw brother."

"I was not mistaken, for I found my man here, playing the part of a dead man, and his brother is an outlaw leader known as the King of the Cloven Hoofs, his real name being King Bentley."

"This man's real name is Brandt Bentley."

"Some time ago I suspected your clerk, sir, but he was so well disguised I did not know him, for I only saw him once, as long as I have tracked him."

"I wrote East for all photographs I could get of him, and set a skilled ferret to work, and I received letters only to-day at noon which told me that Captain Bradshaw was here as the post clerk, while a communication from my detective friend showed that he had discovered that Bradshaw had been murdered and buried by his murderer."

"Thus I picked up the clues, put them together, and in this man found the one I wanted, and the murderer of Captain Burke Bradshaw."

CHAPTER LIX.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR ACOUSER.

To picture the amazement of all who had listened so attentively to the strange story of Little Lone Star would be impossible.

There at the post had been a man playing the part of one he had murdered, and who was none other than the brother of the King of the Cloven Hoofs!

There in their midst had been a real detective, who had been their comrade, a quiet man, handsome, genial, well educated, who knew the world, and was capable of making a mark elsewhere, yet was contented to live the life of a Pony Express rider.

And this man, Lone Star, had been doing double duty, as pony rider and in tracking down a dangerous criminal.

When he had finished his story Lone Star revealed his "authority" and proof.

There was a paper signed by the President of the United States, another by the Governor of Texas, and a third by the Governor of the Territory of Utah.

There was a commission as captain of Texas Rangers, papers as United States Marshal, notary public for the States, and gold badges of office, one of them studded with diamonds and presented by the Secret Service Bureau at Washington for valuable services rendered.

Captain Nat Starbuck, his brother, Wild Bill, and others glanced over the proofs and were more than satisfied, when suddenly a slender form came forward and said:

"May I testify, Captain Starbuck, against this man?"

It was "Jane."

"Why, Jane, what have you to say?" asked Captain Starbuck, astonished, while Wild Bill muttered:

"Another surprise is going to be sprung upon us."

"I have to say, sir, that I will no longer unsex myself by playing the part I have, assuming to be what I am not, a man."

"I am a woman, sir, and that man's wife."

"He married me when I was but seven-teen. He squandered my father's fortune and drove him to take his own life."

"My father was an Englishman and married a Mexican girl, who was my mother. She died when I was but fourteen, on a ranch in Texas, and what she left in the way of a fortune my father took to New York with him and made a great deal of money with it."

"We were happy until Brandt Bentley crossed his path and became his confidential clerk."

"He won my love, married me, and wrecked my father; then he deserted me!"

"That was eight years ago. With no kindred to call on, I went on the stage and played boys' parts. This made me stick to male attire to carry out my intention, that of finding Brandt Bentley and being avenged for the great wrongs he had done me."

"I found him here, and I saw that he was playing some deep game, putting his head in a noose; so I waited to allow him rope enough to hang himself with."

"I think he has done so, for I am willing to leave my revenge to Lone Star."

"You will be avenged," was Lone Star's low and significant reply.

The story of Jane had been listened to with deepest interest. If any one in the camps had ever suspected her of being a woman, from her womanly looks, fine face and quiet mien, they had afterwards banished the suspicion.

Now she appeared as another witness against the man who had been their comrade, dwelt in their midst and whom no one had suspected of evil.

The accused still sat like one in a dream, just as he had dropped back in the chair when Lone Star had mastered him.

He appeared utterly crushed until Captain Starbuck asked Lone Star the motive of the man in coming there as a clerk.

Then Bentley looked up with eager interest to hear the pony rider's reply, which was

"He was playing a bold game for future advantage, sir."

"You get word ahead when packages of extra value pass over the trail. Well, he, as clerk, knew of those packages and their worth."

"Since the Spring set in there has been no hold-up on the trail until Buffalo Bill's run some days ago, and which showed that the Cloven Hoofs were again on the warpath."

"The King of the Cloven Hoofs is this man's brother. He intended to play into his hands for gain, and, when a very valuable freight came through, the outlaws would have gotten it or he would have turned up missing."

"Prisoner, what have you to say to this charge against you?" and Captain Starbuck turned to the accused, who answered quickly:

"It is false, for I am not the man that Lone Star accuses me of being."

"I will give you my parole not to escape, and when you hear from the company you will know that he has wrongfully accused me."

"You are no longer my prisoner, but Lone Star's, or rather, as we know him, now, Captain Homer Harkaway."

"And I will see that he does not escape," said Lone Star.

"Hang him!"

"Up with him!"

"He must die now!"

"Yes, hang him now, and try him afterwards."

Such were the cries heard on all sides, but Lone Star sprang upon the table and called out:

"Pards, the man will be hanged in good time. I have not tracked him for years to have you string him up now, and you will not force me to prove that I will die in his defense before you should harm him."

"He is my prisoner, and his scalp, from the different rewards offered, is worth ten thousand dollars, outside of which is my professional pride in having run him down. I will see that he is cared for and kept secure."

"Three cheers for Lone Star!" cried one of the crowd and they were given with a will.

CHAPTER LX.

THE BENEFIT OF A DOUBT.

As the case of Brandt Bentley, the real name of the prisoner, had been settled by Lone Star's story and charges against him, for no one doubted them, it was decided by Captain Starbuck to hold the trial of Kit Kirby, the traitor guide, in the morning, hoping that Buffalo Bill would be in from his run in time to appear as a witness.

Bentley was at once given into the keeping of Lone Star by Captain Starbuck, and he took him with him to his cabin for safe keeping, his pard, Devil Dan, being only too ready to help guard him, for Happy Harper had been one of the slain in the fight at the ford with the Indians.

"I will give you Happy Harper's bunk, Bentley, and will have to put manacles on your feet also, for I do not intend to lose my sleep, or let Devil Dan do so, either."

"Behave yourself, and there will be no trouble," said Lone Star, when he escorted his prisoner to his cabin.

Devil Dan went with them, and was most deeply impressed with the discovery he had made regarding his pard being a great detective.

He did not treat him as he had before, upon familiar terms, but addressed him as "Sir" and "Mister," until Lone Star told him to "let up on that, pard."

Around every cabin fire that night, the trial and exposure of Bentley were the theme of conversation, and many wondered if Kit Kirby would not also develop some mysterious sensation on the morrow.

So much did this idea gain ground, that when the bugle sounded calling the people to the trial in the morning, settlers and miners all knocked off work; the stablemen came in full force, and every pony rider then in the post was promptly on hand.

That no one should miss the trial through guarding his prisoner, Lone Star took him with him, though it was very sure that Bentley would not enjoy being there, unless for the reason that misery loves company.

When Captain Starbuck opened "court" he certainly had a crowded house, and Bentley, after the sensational stories about him the night before, found that he was sharing the honors with Kit Kirby.

The latter did not seem to be much moved by his dangerous situation, and sat quietly looking over the faces turned upon him.

A larger number of the fair sex was on hand, as the women of the train were all interested in the trial of the man who had been guiding them to destruction when checked by Buffalo Bill.

When all was ready, Captain Starbuck called upon a miner, settler, two stablemen, and two pony riders to serve as jurors, not drawing one from the train people on account of prejudice, and which caused the prisoner to remark:

"Waal, you is certain a squar' jedge, and I guesses as how I'll git justice, though I kinder thought I was goin' ter be roped and no marcy showed."

"You'll get fair play here, prisoner, for

you shall be judged innocent or guilty wholly by the testimony of the witnesses, and who will tell the truth, knowing that a human life depends upon it, while you shall also give your own story."

"I thankee, jedge; maybe I hain't dead yit."

Captain Starbuck called as the first witness his brother, Thomas Starbuck.

In a few words he told how he had been looking for a guide and the prisoner had come to him as such.

All along he had found him willing, anxious to please, brave and skillful, and he had told him that he could guide him to a splendid place to settle in Superb Valley.

Asked if he knew the Overland post commanded by Captain Nat Starbuck, he had said that he knew about where it was, for it was not far from Superb Valley, but that he had not been up in that country for a year or more, but could find it.

The prisoner had also reported that the redskins had a village in the mountains beyond Superb Valley, but the train people were too strong to fear them.

Captain Tom further stated that he was amazed when Buffalo Bill had overtaken the train and rescued them from their danger, as it was hard to convince him that the guide was a traitor.

Others of the train then gave their testimony, and it was about the same as their leader's.

Then the prisoner was asked what he had to say in his defense.

"Not much, and my looks is ag'in me, so I'm in a bad box."

"The young lady never trusted me, and others felt the same way; but they didn't know that out here a man may be ever so rough lookin', yet have a honest heart."

"Now, ther cap'n has told it squar', as has t'others, and when Buf'ler Bill did come up I was guidin' right fer ther Injun country."

"But Valley Superb lies some thirty miles this side, and it's a finer place to settle in as I ever seen, and I thought the folks was numerous enough ter scare ther reds off, while I didn't think this post was over a few hours' ride away."

"I was a prisoner to ther Injuns once, and saved my top-knot by marryin' a squaw, and I hev been friendly with 'em ever since, though I hain't no renegade."

"When Buf'ler Bill corralled me, I passed, for I knew 'twasn't no use ter kick."

"But I know'd I'd be roped, so I seen my chance ter tumble out o' ther rear o' ther wagon."

"Ef ther reds didn't find me, ther wolves would, and maybe if they found me they'd scalp me, so it was as good one way as t'other, and I took chances."

"Ther Injuns found me, and I stuck to 'em, though I didn't say one word about showin' 'em how to fight ther train people."

"When Buf'ler Bill were as hot on my trail as a wolf, I admits I kilt ther chief whose horse I was helpin' him ter ride, but then it was go under if I didn't."

"That's my tale, jedge, and I s'pose it won't go, and I has got ter die; but, ef so, I'll die game."

"Answer me, prisoner, what you know about Kit Kirby, known as Red Hand the Danite Captain, and who so strikingly resembles you?"

"I knows that we both had the same mother, and he went early to the bad."

"His name was Caleb, mine Kittredge Kirby, but we looked so much alike they used to call us both Kit."

"I heerd when he was hanged, and he had only himself to blame, as I will, ef I hangs, and it looks that way."

The man's manner was honest and made a good impression, and when asked for their verdict, the jury decided that there was a doubt as to his being really a traitor, and they would give him the benefit of the doubt.

This verdict seemed to please all; but, springing to his feet, Bentley called out:

"That man is guilty, and I know it! He is one of the band of Cloven Hoofs, and should hang."

"I acknowledge my guilt, and will make terms, for I will lead Buffalo Bill and his pony riders to the retreat of the King of the Cloven Hoofs, if my life will be spared and I set free."

"It is all I ask, and the information I can give you is cheap at that!"

The offer created a sensation, and all eyes were upon Lone Star, who replied:

"If the Cloven Hoofs can be wiped out through his confession, I will not stand in the way, Captain Starbuck."

"Make no terms with him, for I can guide you to the den of the Cloven Hoofs!" came in the deep tones of Buffalo Bill, as he entered the room, half an hour before he was due at the post.

That his words created a wild sensation may well be understood.

CHAPTER LXI.

A STRANGE FAMILY.

When Buffalo Bill started on his run to Valley Farm he could not but wonder what that trip had in store for him.

The life of a pony rider was exciting, he knew, but it was crowding him to have to fight continually for his own life and the lives of others.

"There does not seem to be any let up," he muttered, as he dashed on.

"But I'm in it to stay, and I won't back out as long as the Cloven Hoofs keep on the trail, that is, unless they call in my chips—ah! There is my unknown again!" and he gathered his reins well in hand as he saw the mysterious guardian of the trail ride out of a pine thicket and halt before him.

It was as he was approaching Wolf Den Pass, the scene of many a lawless hold-up, and where several pony riders had looked their last on earth.

The woman held her hand to her lips, or rather on her veil over her mouth, as he approached, to show that she did not wish him to speak, and then wheeling, rode away out of the trail, beckoning to him to follow.

Buffalo Bill knew too well what her warning had meant in the past not to heed her now, and he slackened his pace and followed.

She led him just as he had gone before, to a stream, then along its bed for some distance, out on the bank, which was rocky, where there was a clump of pines, through them, which hid a break in the cliff, and beyond a small but fertile little valley, little over an acre in size and well wooded, watered, and with the finest pasturage there.

To his surprise, as he entered the pretty basin, he beheld two small cabins, built since last he was there, and a dozen fine horses loose and wandering about, for the break in the cliff was closed with bars.

There were also, to the surprise of the pony rider, other persons in the place, for he beheld before one of the cabins, which had two rooms in it, a negro woman cooking before a fire which was built against the cliff, where there was a natural outlet of some kind for the smoke, as it did not appear above.

A negro man was bringing an armful of wood to the fire, and, seated on a rock, rubbing up a rifle, was a tall and stately Indian, a Sioux, as Buffalo Bill saw at a glance.

He was surprised, certainly, as he beheld this strange and homelike scene, and from the cabins, horses and other people, turned his gaze upon the woman, who had dismounted and lowered the barrier across the entrance, and stood watching and waiting for him.

"Well, Buffalo Bill, you are welcome to my home, and I brought you here for two reasons—Black Jack!"

The negro man at her call threw down his load of wood, the Indian leaped to his feet, and the negro woman turned from her cooking to look at her.

They had not before seen her approach, and Black Jack came running toward her.

"Black Jack, unsaddle my horse and turn him loose, for I shall remain in camp the rest of the day."

"This is Buffalo Bill, of whom you have heard so much, so look after his horse also, then run up the rope ladder and go to the corral and get him a horse from there, the best, for he will go on his trail that way."

"Yes, Miss Lou, I will, and I'm mighty glad to meet Massa Buffalo Bill, though I has seen him afore when he was passin' along the trails."

"Kettle will be mighty glad, too, for she thinks Massa Bill is a spirit, bein' as they can't kill him."

Buffalo Bill shook hands with the negro, who was a splendid specimen of a man, and said:

"I am no spirit, Black Jack, as—Kettle, you call her, will see, though the outlaws frequently try to make one out of me."

Then he turned and stripped his horse of his saddle and bridle, with the pouches containing so much of value, and said:

"You can put this bridle on the horse, and I will saddle him when I come up."

"You are right, Buffalo Bill, though those valuable Express bags would be as safe with Black Jack as with you—say, Jack, get another horse also, and saddle him for me, as I will ride that way also."

"Yes, Miss Lou, but Kettle have dinner ready for you."

"Very well, Mr. Cody will dine with me and then we will go."

"Now, let me introduce to you the rest of my family. Had you visited me last fall I would have had to present you to over a score of outlaws of the Cloven Hoofs."

They had walked toward the cabins now and the Indian approached them, a tall, stately man, with a serious, but intelligent, face, and intense black eyes, that were most striking.

"Mr. Cody, this is my friend, scout, guide and guardian, Night Eyes."

"He saved the life of a pale-face who had once befriended him, and his tribe turned against him and he came to the Cloven Hoofs."

"The King of the Cloven Hoofs would have had him hanged one day, but I prevented the crime, and to-day he is my devoted friend."

"Night Eyes, this is Buffalo Bill."

"Me know Buf'ler Bill, mighty chief—me see him many times."

Buffalo Bill held out his hand, and as he grasped that of the Indian, he said, in the Sioux tongue:

"The chief Night Eyes will be my friend."

The sound of his own tongue greatly pleased the Indian, as his face and manner showed plainly.

"Now, Mr. Cody, this is another member of my family, Kettle, the wife of Black Jack, and as devoted to me as a mother could be."

"Kettle, you see that Buffalo Bill is real flesh and blood after all and not a ghost-man, as you have thought."

But it was with some awe that Kettle grasped the hand extended to her, and which gave her own a hard grip.

"Is that the cold, clammy grip of a ghost, Kettle?" asked Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"No, sah; it hain't—it's raal; but you hain't no ordinary man no how, if yer hain't a sperit."

"Now, Mr. Cody, there are some other members of my family," and she pointed to a large mountain lion lying in the sun, two bloodhounds and a wildcat, all watching Buffalo Bill attentively, but seemingly satisfied as long as he was with their mistress.

"They have all been raised from cubs and are well trained."

"Those bloodhounds will follow any trail I set them—have a pair of wolves, now off hunting, I guess, for their dinner, that are also well trained."

"Now, as you have met my family, let me introduce myself," and she quickly took off the thick veil she wore.

"Lena Ross—Little Sunbeam!" cried Buffalo Bill.

"No, her sister!" came the low response of the Guardian of the Trail.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE UNKNOWN'S CONFESSION.

Buffalo Bill was astounded at the discovery he had made, and then a smile stole over his face as he said:

"I ought to have known it, after once before seeing your face, and recalling what Little Sunbeam had said."

Although he had had dinner just before leaving the post, he could not refuse the kind invitation to dine with the fair guardian of the trail, and he was surprised to see how well she lived, and Kettle served everything well, and was certainly a good cook.

"Night Eyes does all my trading for me, at a Mormon settlement, going and coming each month, and Black Jack and Kettle take the best of care of my little home."

"I should think so," said Buffalo Bill, looking at the well built cabin and seeing how neat it was.

There were the cabin for the negroes also, a winter kitchen connected, and a room for the Indian, with a shelter for the horses and the wild pets which the woman had trained.

"Now we will go, and you will be on time, as this way, you know, cuts off many miles."

"I came here to live last fall, when I thought I had killed the King of the Cloven Hoofs."

Buffalo Bill gazed at the woman with strangest interest.

She was the image of Lena Ross, but older, it seemed, and a little taller.

Her face was bronzed, but very beautiful, though a closer look showed an expression about the mouth that Lena Ross did not have—a look of almost sternness, while the eyes had a certain melancholy in them that was also not visible in Little Sunbeam's.

"Here is our ladder. You went up on a lasso when you dodged the Cloven Hoofs in Wolf Den Pass last fall," she said.

Buffalo Bill quickly mounted the rope ladder, and she followed with equal ease to the top of the cliff.

The pony rider had his pouches slung upon his back, and upon reaching the cliff they found there Black Jack with two horses saddled and bridled.

"I have a secret corral, where I have a dozen more fine horses," she explained, and she leaped to her saddle without any effort.

"You are behind to this point just forty minutes, so you can ride along at a slow pace as far as I go. You see I know schedule time," she said, with a smile, replacing a handsome watch she had looked at to note the time.

"Don't mind me, for I would lose hours to discover what I have to-day."

"Well, now you shall discover more, for I intend to confess."

"Confess?"

"Yes, for I have a confession to make, and I wish you to do me a great service."

"I shall be glad to."

"I will not tire you with a long story, but tell you again that Lena Rossmore, for that is her name, is my sister, George Rossmore my father—you call him Gentleman George Ross."

"I am three years older than Lena, and I met and loved a man I deemed all that was noble."

"I found him all that was ignoble."

"He is the cause of my father living here to-day as a stock-tender, for he is accused of a crime the man I loved is guilty of, and had he not, for Lena's sake, come West, he would now be in prison for life, or have been hanged."

"It ruined my father, for it swept away his fortune and branded him as a murderer."

"Appearances pointed to his having killed one whose property he had in his keeping, and which he had to account for."

"The real murderer was my husband, King Bentley, known to you as the King of the Cloven Hoofs."

"When I knew the truth, for I had run away to marry the man, I was the one

who aided my father's escape from prison, though he never knew it."

"I sent him money to leave the country with, but, strange to say, he came out here, and, without knowing it, right where I was."

"I clung to my sinful husband through all, but for a purpose."

"To get the proofs that he was guilty—my father was innocent."

"When, last fall, my husband, as King of the Cloven Hoofs, told me he had destroyed all proofs, I shot him, and believed I had killed him."

"I fled then, with my faithful negro friends and servants, who have clung to me through all, and Night Eyes left the outlaws and came later, and joined me, and he it was told me that King Bentley was not dead, the bullet having glanced, and that he had gone away for the winter with a few of his men, but would return in the spring again to dog the Pony Express trail."

"So I decided to remain, and we went to that little valley and established our home for the winter."

"I was glad I had not killed King Bentley, for I would not have the remorse of the act."

"I know now where his secret retreat is, for Night Eyes has found it, as you know that he kept his word and came back in the spring."

"Now I also know that at the post King Bentley has a brother, and he is his spy."

"He is known as Burke Bradshaw, the captain's clerk."

"I also know that the man Kit Kirby, the traitor guide, is the real one you knew as Red Hand the Danite Captain, the man they hanged last fall being his brother and an outlaw, so that the hanging was not amiss."

"This man was guiding the train to the Indians for them to scalp the men and have the women and children as captives, simply to keep the redskins on the good side of the Cloven Hoofs."

"You acted promptly and thwarted the scheme."

"Now to the favor I ask of you, Buffalo Bill."

"Name it."

"You are on your way to Valley Farm, so see my father and sister, and tell them that I have bitterly repented of my life's mistake and have cruelly suffered for it."

"Tell them that it was I who rescued my father from prison—that King Bentley went from bad to worse, until he became King of the Cloven Hoofs."

"Tell them that Night Eyes is to guide you and your Pony Riders' Patrol to his retreat, and that he has there all proofs of my father's innocence—King Bentley's guilt."

"When father has these proofs, if he wants me to come to him, and Lena wants me, too, for I have seen them both at a distance, since I saw you last, you can come for me, and I will go."

"You know where to find me, and Night Eyes will await at Wolf Den Pass for you and your patrol to-morrow at sunset. Now the Cloven Hoofs are there waiting for you. Good-by." And she wheeled and dashed away, for her voice began to quiver with emotion.

Buffalo Bill looked after her a moment and dashed on his way.

He urged the horse from station to station, faster than ever before, and reached Valley Farm two hours ahead of time.

There he had a long talk with Gentleman George and his daughter, the result of which was that Lena Rossmore rode back on the Pony trail with him, changing horses at each station as he did, and they left the moment that Pony Bob brought in the Express from the westward, so had an hour the start of the time.

If Buffalo Bill had expected Lena would delay him he was mistaken, for she kept the pace he set, and though there was a few minutes lost for an extra horse at the stations, the time was more than made up.

At last the cliff was reached, and Black Jack was there to receive him.

"Missy Lou is off somewhar, sir," he said.

"All right; take Miss Lena to her cabin to await her return, while I go on."

"But tell Night Eyes I will be back at the pass to-night with my patrol," and Buffalo Bill, finding his horse ready saddled down in the valley, went on his way at the same lightning speed, leaving Lena with the now happy Black Jack.

That Buffalo Bill arrived ahead of time has been seen, and stopped the making of any terms with Brandt Bentley, who was going to betray his brother and comrades to save his own life.

CHAPTER LXIII.

CONCLUSION.

It was a terrible blow to Brandt Bentley when he could not save himself by the betrayal of his brother, and, cursing bitterly, he was led away to the lockup and put into double irons.

"Where is Kit Kirby?" Buffalo Bill asked.

He was told of his honest story and that the jury had rendered a verdict of "Not Guilty."

"Stop him! Catch him! He is a human fiend!" shouted Buffalo Bill.

But Kit Kirby was gone. He had quickly slipped away the moment the verdict was rendered, and nowhere could he be found.

Then Buffalo Bill had a talk with Captain Starbuck and Lone Star, the result of which was that the Pony Riders' Patrol, twenty-five all told, rode away from the post just one hour after Buffalo Bill's arrival, and their destination was the Wolf Den Pass.

There was found Night Eyes awaiting them, and he led the way on to the secret retreat of the Cloven Hoofs, arriving there at midnight, when all were asleep.

"Quietly the patrol surrounded the retreat, Buffalo Bill gave the word to advance, and then came the order to surrender!"

To the demand to surrender the outlaws, nine in number, for that was all the force the King then had, answered with shots, and a hot fight followed, men falling on both sides, until at last came the cry of the King of the Cloven Hoofs:

"We show no quarter! We ask none!"

"So be it, then," answered Buffalo Bill, and the fight was then to the death, the King being the last to fall, shot through the head by Lone Star.

Though already bleeding from several severe wounds, the bandit leader had fought on to the end.

Four of the patrol had been killed, and over a dozen wounded, several severely.

Buffalo Bill and Lone Star had each been twice touched, but fortunately only slightly.

"Here home of bad chief. All talking papers, money and much goods," said Night Eyes, and he led the way to the secret hiding place of the Cloven Hoof chief's booty.

"Lone Star, gather all of that in. I leave you in full charge, for I return to the post to get a little rest before starting time to-morrow," said Buffalo Bill, and he reached camp in the early dawn.

Throwing himself upon his cot he told Black Diamond to awaken him at eleven.

At that hour he was up, had his dinner, and went to the post with time to spare to the great surprise of all who did not know of his return.

"We got them, Captain. Lone Star will soon be in and tell you all. Here comes Wild Bill," and Buffalo Bill was away on his run.

When he reached Valley Farm that night, a little ahead of time, he found Lena there also. She had brought with her Lou Bentley, Black Jack, Kettle and the entire outfit, and all were united once more.

Buffalo Bill told his story of the attack on the Cloven Hoofs, and all that was said Lou Bentley uttered:

"So let it be; it is better so, for his blood is not on my hands."

No explanations were to be made to any one more than that Gentleman George's eldest daughter should come to

visit him, and there they were all to remain until it was decided when they would go east. That was all that was to be known, save to a chosen few, of the life of the pony riders' mascot.

When Buffalo Bill was on his return run he met Night Eyes on his way to Valley Farm, who told him the patrol had gone on to the post. They were there when he arrived.

The papers of the dead outlaw chief were all turned over to Buffalo Bill, the money and booty, as Lou Bentley had directed, being divided among the Pony Patrol, who had suffered so much from the band.

When Buffalo Bill had told Captain Starbuck, Wild Bill and Lone Star all, he sought a much needed rest, but was off on time the next day and the papers he carried to Gentleman George were convincing proof of his innocence, and of King Bentley's guilt.

"We will go east some day and raise this cloud from my life," he said.

Lone Star and his prisoner started east, Kit Kirby having made good his escape, and the daring detective delivered him up to the proper authorities for punishment.

That done, the great detective returned to the post once more, lured there by the magnetic eyes of Angel Ada, who, in turn, seemed much pleased with the handsome and brave young Texan.

The settlement grew and prospered, and in time the Pony Express became a thing of the past, but several of its gallant riders yet live to recall the days of the Flying Horsemen of the Overland.

THE END.

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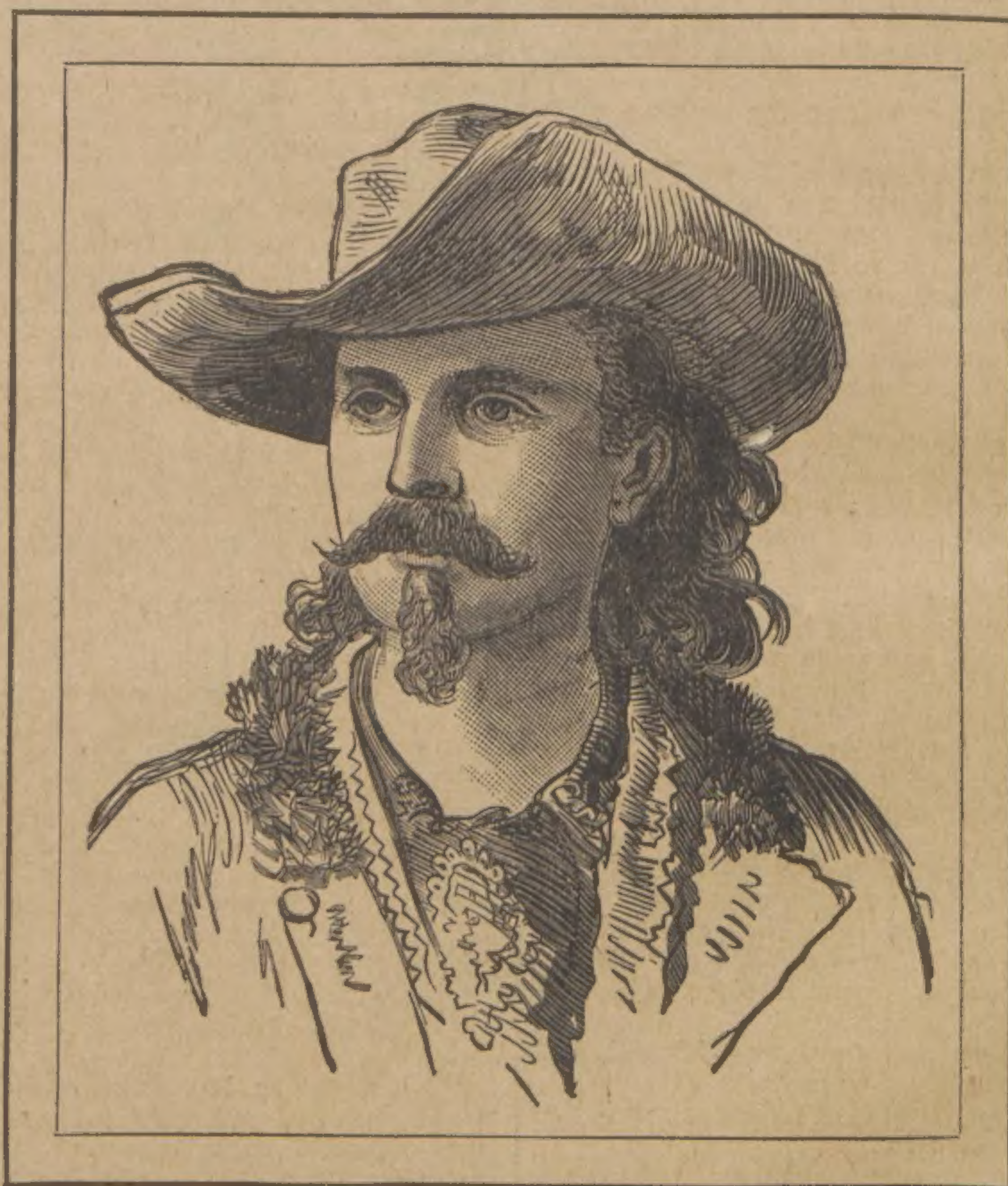
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